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Rebecca M. Reséndiz Rodriguez

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, rebecca.resendizrodriguez@utrgv.edu

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Photography:

A culturally sensitive bereavement aid?

By Rebecca M. Reséndiz Rodríguez, PsyD

In the past twenty-two months almost 900,000 people (*Global Change Data Lab, 2022*) have died in the U.S. alone from Covid-19 and our typical death rituals have been significantly affected by restrictions on gathering size and concerns for vulnerable loved ones. Covid-19 has brought issues of loss and grief to the forefront of our lives as people confront Covid-19 related loss daily.

However significant and unexpected, loss has always been a part of our daily lives with 2.8 million deaths recorded in the U.S. 2018 (*Xu, Murphy, Kochanek, & Arias, 2020*).

According to the World Health Organization, 3.3 million infants die within the first 4 weeks of life (*The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, 2011*) world-wide and in 2018, there were almost 21,500 infant deaths reported in the United States (*Ely & Driscoll, 2018*).

Death and the accompanying grief are not new concepts in therapy, so perhaps our bereavement aids need not be either. Old photographs reveal that bereavement photography was once an acceptable custom practiced openly in many countries, including the U.S. (*Ruby, 1995 and Van Der Zee, Dodson, & Billops, 1978*). Yet in the U.S. today, many people seem unaware bereavement photography exists and have no context with which to understand the bereavement photographs of the 1800s. Out of two encyclopedic books on the history of photography and photographs, only

one briefly mentions bereavement photography in the U.S. (*Rosenblum, 1997*). Death, once prominent, began slowly vanishing from sight by the end of the 19th century in all industrialized countries. Goldberg (2005) attributes medical advances as well as the social and religious changes which occurred throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries to changes in attitudes

toward death in the U.S.

People keep photographs as keepsakes, but mourners may keep photographs of the dead as an affirmation that this person not



only existed but was important; a photograph may serve as a monument of sorts to the deceased's life and death. In the Rio Grande Valley, people chose to honor their deceased with a billboard video-memorial made up of photographs sent in by surviving family members, "I hope this memorial can offer collective healing into the hearts of all those who lost friends and loved ones to this horrible disease" (*Judge Cortez in Mendez, J., 2021*). It should be noted that people have been documenting infant death in photographs as keepsakes for families since at least the mid-80s (*McGhie, 1989*) and the Institute of Medical Illustrators has even published guidelines for neonatal bereavement photography (*IMI, 2009*). There is ample evidence that bereavement photography is being used in the U.S. to help parents cope with the loss of a child. Bereavement photography provides survivors with a tangible memento of

the deceased and the funeral, making them important “pictorial representations as memorial and memorative links to the past for those who create and share them with others” (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 1997, p. 294).

Bereavement photographs mark the final stage of an individual’s life and, as with neonatal bereavement photography, proof of a child’s brief existence. This same practice is evident in Mexico, where it was more common among the lower class/poor who had higher death rates among children (Sánchez Lacy, 1998). In this practice, the death of a child is celebrated as a transformation into Angelitos, little angels (Sánchez Lacy, 1998). Angelitos are thought to watch over their families, a belief deeply rooted in the primarily Catholic, Mexican culture. This Mexican custom of capturing a child in death began as early as the 18th century, as exhibited in later paintings by Mexican artists such as Frida Kahlo (*El difuntito Dimas Rosas, a los tres años de edad, 1937*), Juan Soriano (*La Niña Muerta, 1944*), and Olga Costa (*Niño Muerto, 1944*), eventually leading to a specialized version of the bereavement photography seen in the U.S.

The fact that we keep hundreds of pictures on our phones or in scrap books suggests their importance and may be the reason that bereavement photographs are also thought to aid the psychotherapeutic process (Han & Oliffe, 2016; Krauss & Fryrear,



the capacity for photography to elicit conversations and stories in therapy. This suggests that bereavement photography could be similarly utilized to elicit a client’s thoughts and feelings about death and the deceased and support mean-

ing-making activities. Therapists have only to ask about bereavement photography to begin the conversation.

Photographs are capable of evoking a sense of place, time, emotion, relationship, or connection for the viewer without telling all. Indeed, viewers complete the picture from where they sit, often arriving at clarity of self. It is all of these qualities that are so effective in aiding the dying and the bereaved. (Hochberg, n.d.)

1983). It has been proposed that bereavement images trigger a projective process for the viewer. Guided discussion regarding the images can yield valuable information and therapists can learn a great deal about clients from their photographs.

Whether the photographs are taken in life or after someone has died, the literature supports photographs as therapeutic tools that encourage conversation and reveal unconscious thoughts. Various techniques, such as PhotoTherapy and Life Review therapy, have used photography to evoke emotion, assist with the development of self-esteem, and examine relationships and family dynamics (Krauss & Fryrear, 1983, p.10). There are also self-initiated techniques, such as Therapeutic Photography which was developed as a means of self-discovery and personal growth, and Photovoice, a modern research tool that uses participants’ personal photographs to facilitate dialogue (Han & Oliffe, 2016). Riegel’s (2019) study during end-of-life care, purports memory-making promotes adjustment following the death of loved ones. While these methods do not mention the inclusion of bereavement images specifically, they do demonstrate



Rebecca M. Reséndiz Rodriguez, PsyD
School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry,
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley