

# Living with Traumatic Brain Injury: Narrative Analysis of a Survivor's Photographs and Interview Text

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**Abstract.** Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a serious problem affecting not only injured individuals but also their families and communities. The lived experience of people with TBI can inform peers, families, providers, and policymakers of issues related to living with this injury and facilitators and barriers to recovery from the patient's perspective. In an exploratory study intended to inform a dissertation proposal, a TBI survivor took photographs of living with her injury and the people and circumstances that have helped and slowed her recovery, and discussed her photographs with the researcher. This poster presents an analysis of the study data (images and text) using three narrative analysis methods—looking at the details of an individual photograph, structuring the interview text into its discourse units, and grouping the respondent's series of photographs into plot categories (problem, action, and resolution). The analysis provides a glimpse of the impact of a TBI on an individual's perceptions of self and her feelings of connection (and disconnection), hints at the usefulness of the photograph in helping this survivor to articulate living with a brain injury and sum up her experience, brings out movement in her healing over time, and reveals her hopes for the future.

**Research Objective.** To gain an understanding of lived experience with traumatic brain injury and the facilitators and barriers to recovery from the perspective of a survivor.

**Sample.** This case-centered study had one adult traumatic brain injury (TBI) respondent. As specified in the protocol, she had a cognitive level of at least seven on the Ranchos Los Amigos Cognitive Level Scale (one being lowest and ten being highest), and she had received her injury no more than five years prior to the study.

**Study Method.** This was a qualitative research study using photo-elicitation and narrative analysis methods. I met with the respondent three times: first to discuss the project and go over the informed consent form, again to pick up the camera, and a third time to discuss her photographs. I asked her to take photographs of living with TBI and facilitators and barriers to recovery from her perspective. The camera was a disposable one with 27 images. She finished the film after three weeks. We spoke for four and a half hours. For more than two hours she talked about her process taking the photographs and shared some family snaps of people she couldn't photograph for the study. Then we went through her photos one by one, and she talked about what they meant for her, why she had taken them, and how she had settled on or created the particular images.

**Principle Findings.** Looking at the details of an individual photograph, as suggested by Becker (1986), provides hints of deeper information and meanings that are not apparent in the image at first glance. Structuring the interview text into its discourse units, as modeled by James Gee (1991), shows the usefulness of the photograph in helping the respondent to articulate living with TBI and sum up her experience. Grouping the study photographs and their text excerpts into plot categories, as inspired by Elliot Mishler (2004), brings out movement in the participant's healing over time and reveals her hopes for the future—information that is not gleaned by analyzing a single photograph and its interview data.

**Conclusions.** This respondent's visual and interview data tell of her challenges living with TBI, her compensation strategies, her gradual improvement over time, and her sense of inner pride and hope for the future. Rich et al (2002, 2006) have referred to a series of respondent images (video) and text as a visual illness narrative. For this TBI respondent, four years after her injury, her images (photographs) and text could be called a visual healing narrative.

**Implications for Policy and Practice.** All three of the analyses presented here appear to tell a valid story, and perhaps each is a partial telling. In using more than one approach to analyzing narrative data, we as researchers and policy makers become part of the dialogue not only in asking questions and responding to the stories, but also in our analysis of the resulting narrative, be it visual, textual, or both. Using three approaches to analyzing our data may help us to gain a deeper understanding of what the data can tell us.

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## Looking at the Details



**Discussion.** In this image, we see a television cable connection sticking out of the wall, unconnected to anything. It hangs in the air above a blue rug and a heating vent. For the respondent, this disconnection is symbolic of how her brain felt after her injury.

Below the heating vent and against the back wall, grey and black wires lie neatly bundled. Thus, some wires in the photograph are connected and functioning, while others are not. This is analogous to the functioning of an injured individual's brain: parts will work just fine, while others won't.

The wall's reflection of the heating vent serves as a reminder that this photograph is merely a reflection of reality, not reality. It is a representation of truth as perceived by one individual, at one point in time, and taken for the purpose of communicating in the specific context of the research interview.

## Structuring the Discourse

### Living without Connection

#### Part 1: Why I took this picture

Stanza 1: That's how I felt  
Stanza 2: I thought that kind of depicted it  
Coda: A lot of unsaid things there

#### Part 2: Everything was new

Stanza 3: It was like living in the middle of nowhere  
Stanza 4: It was as though you were just born anew  
Coda: Hard to explain  
Stanza 5: I basically laughed through every day

#### Part 3: How I see it now in hindsight

Stanza 6: It all had to like be reestablished  
Stanza 7: I had so many gaps in my brain  
Stanza 8: My reaction was this laughter  
Coda: A perfect way to sum it all up

#### Part 4: I couldn't feel really connected, in lots of ways

Stanza 9: Are you really, truly connecting  
Stanza 10: That's what I meant

**Discussion.** Breaking the text up into idea units, lines, stanzas, and strophes, illuminated a structure that reveals the perspective or point of view of the respondent. This approach to analyzing an interview text by breaking it down into its narrative structure bonds the analysis closely to the actual words of the narrator.

This summary of the structural analysis helps us to understand the overall form of the narrative: introduction to the topic, placing herself in the past, looking at the past from the present, and summing up. She comments that the photo contains a lot of "unsaid things" which implies that the image is a narrative in and of itself. Without this image, the respondent might find her perspective, her experience hard to explain. This symbolic image, visualized for us in a photograph, appears to be a useful way for her to show and sum up what she was going through during that period of her life.

## Problem



This picture here, there's no connection and ...that's how I felt... right after my accident, that...there were so many missing links as I tried to begin living again... a perfect way to sum it all up

## Action



...to remember something, I would have to...place it right in the middle of the floor...I was trying to remember to take a picture that day

## Resolution



The pride that you can see...as she [Janet] stands there, is the pride that I feel in my accomplishments. And it's very similar to the pride of a young child as she's growing...she symbolizes for me the hope, for the future.

## Plotting the Sequence

**Discussion.** Grouping the study photographs and their text excerpts into plot categories brings out movement in the participant's healing over time and reveals her hopes for the future—information that would be more difficult to glean from analyzing a single photograph and its interview data, frozen in time. For the analysis, I included 15 of her 27 photographs, after first removing all duplicate photographs and photos that were "mistakes" (e.g., a photograph of the ground). I did not include some photographs of family members, due to their repetitive nature. We discussed her photographs in the sequence in which she took them. The analysis transformed that sequence.