

Portrait Photography – A Rehabilitative Tool?

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INTRODUCTION

Medicine is an increasingly photography-driven field. Historically, conventional forms of photography have been used for diagnostic, teaching, and progress purposes, ranging from didactics to documentation.¹ Nonetheless, the application of photographic techniques for therapy and clinical purposes has been growing in recent years², but still scarcely explored. Current ideas within this subject include “**phototherapy**,” “**photo-elicitation**,” “**photovoice**” therapeutic **photography**,” as well as **portrait therapy**.^{3,4} All of these techniques utilize photographic images to foster healing and well-being. However, most applications of photographic implementation differ in practice.⁵ At La Maison de Femmes in Saint-Dennis, France, portrait photography – another subset of photography that focuses on the human face, body, or inherent character – was a supplemental activity offered to victimized women to help them reclaim their bodies and identities.⁶ There, a photographer created portraits of the women over a period of time, allowing them to directly engage in and witness their recovery process. Using this past anecdote as a departure point, this presentation seeks to further examine the relationship between portrait photography and mental/physiological well-being.

OBJECTIVE

Explore how **portrait photography**, the **self-engagement with portrait images**, or the **process** of being photographed may operate as a complementary tool for healing – including factors such as self-awareness, personal identity formation, body-image, etc. – in clinical and non-clinical settings.

METHODS

- A preliminary literature review was conducted using selected electronic databases: (1) **PubMed (MEDLINE)**, (2) **EMBASE**, and (3) **Cochrane Library of Systematic Reviews**
- Searched with **13** unique keyword combinations using Boolean operators (Figure 1)
- All languages and years included

INCLUSION CRITERIA

- Only Peer Reviewed Journals Selected
- Use of Portrait Photography, Photo voice, or Therapeutic Photography in the context of well-being and affect

EXCLUSION CRITERIA

- Observational Studies
- Photographic Studies without clinical or psychosocial context

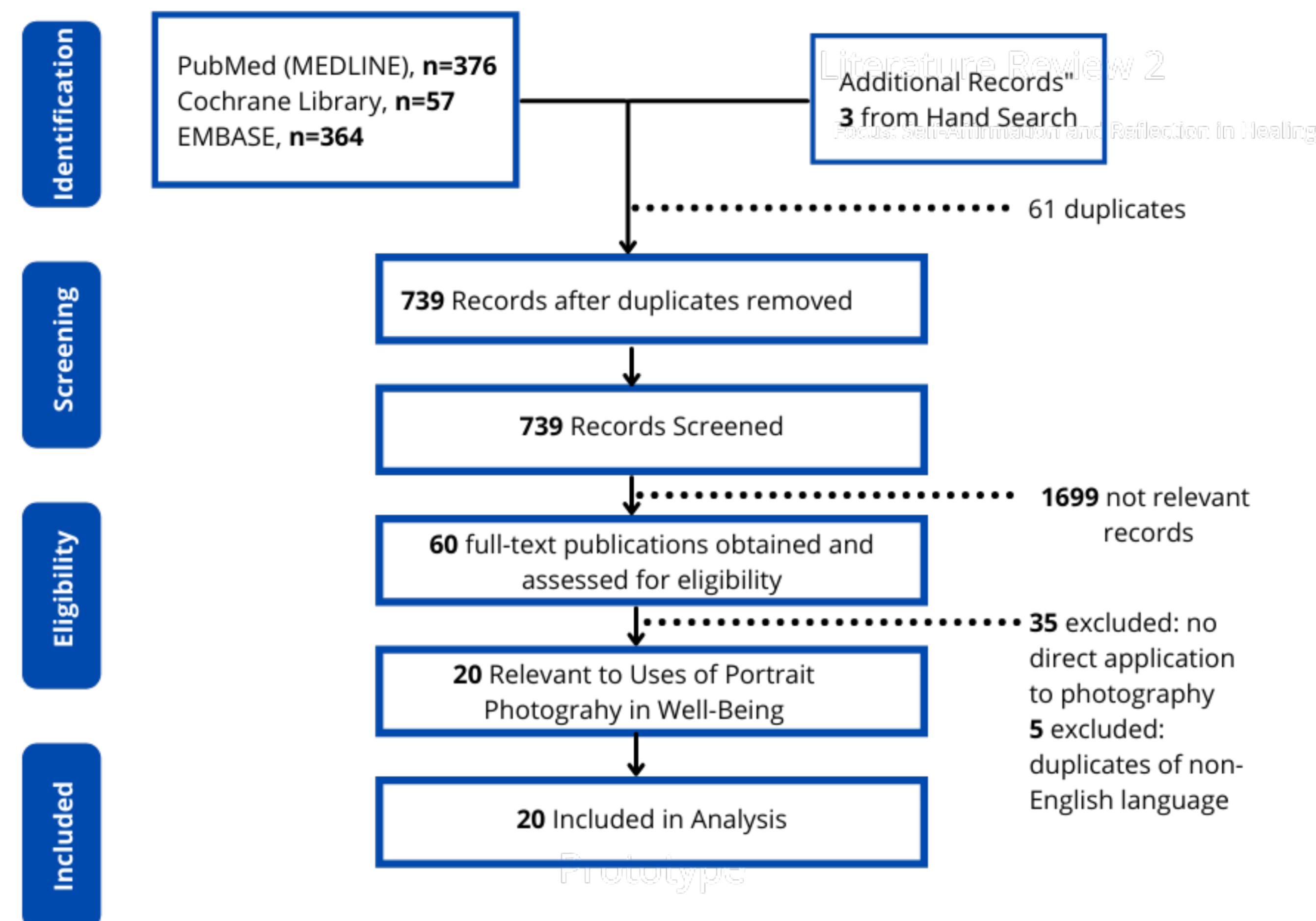


Figure 1: Flowchart of Preliminary Literature Review Conducted

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

- **Photovoice** (Figure 2) and **Photo-Elicitation** are the main methods for photography-based research in the area of recovery⁷
- There is significantly **limited** data for the particular use of **portrait photography** as an emotional or psychological rehabilitative tool
- **Photo-Elicitation** in some instances provide more detailed information of a patient health narrative, providing better insights for clinicians⁸
- Uses of the **Self-Portrait** (Figure 3) or **Portrait Therapy** also has scarce data. One study examining depressed individuals found that Depressed individuals were more likely to report difficulties in establishing “**present**” and “**future**” self through photography⁹

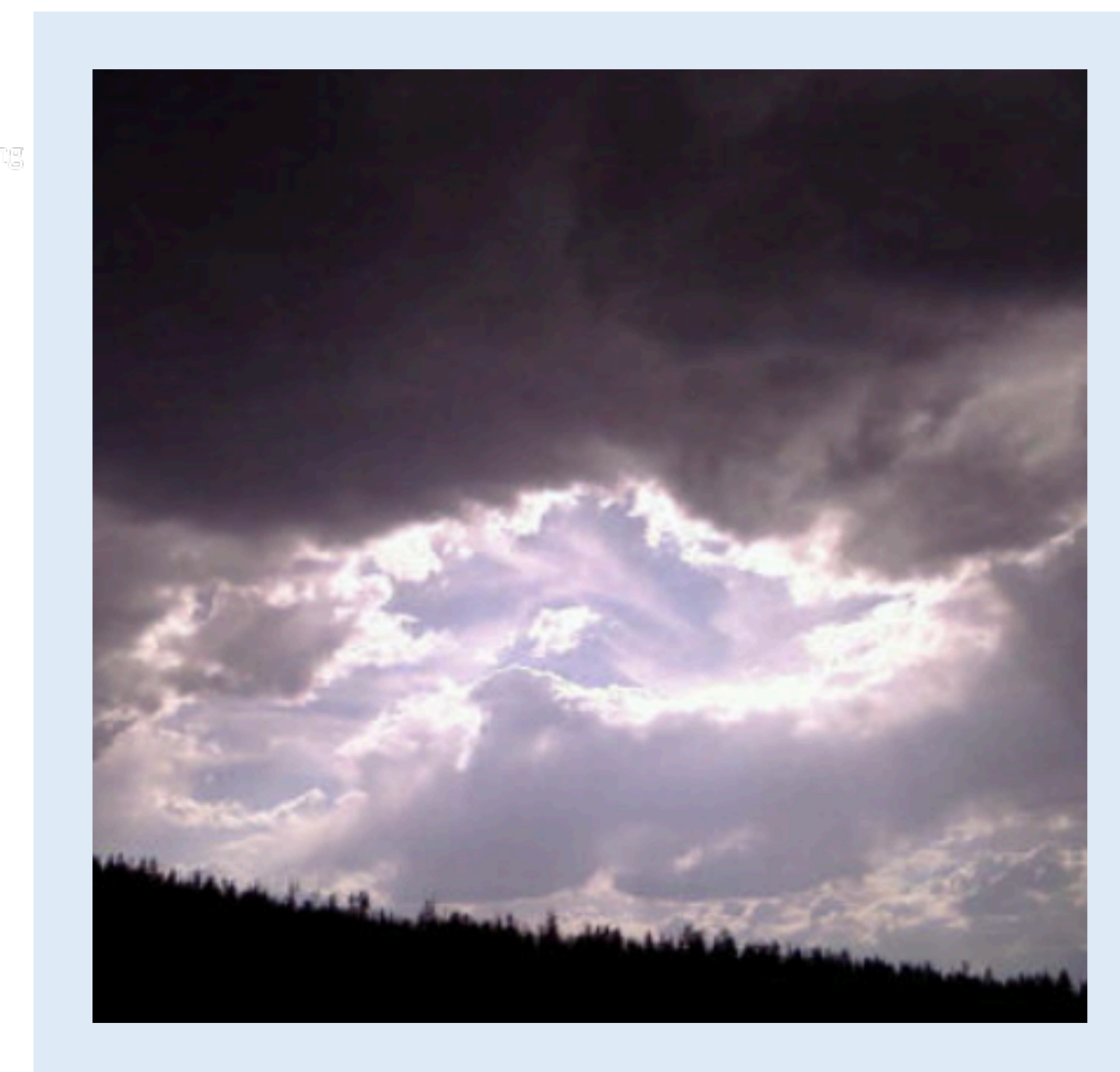


Figure 2: “Day of Diagnosis” Example of Photovoice among HIV/AIDS patient participants¹⁰

DISCUSSION & LIMITATIONS

Despite the promising studies on the current applications of photographic techniques in the space of physical health, mental health, and social well-being, there is sparse data on both the theoretical use and application of portrait photography as a rehabilitative tool. On a case basis, some photographers such as **Tarik Carroll** of the **EveryMAN** Project have utilized portrait photography to celebrate the diverse bodies and backgrounds of men.¹¹ While this has indeed impacted others, where Carroll has stated “[this work] has influenced and encouraged others to feel confident,” it cannot answer whether the engagement of photography itself played a role with its participants. Furthermore, case studies such as **Susan Carr’s** proposed **portrait therapy** that utilized portrait photography over a 10-month period for a woman with childhood trauma, also included “portrait sculptures, prose poems, and collages.”^{12,13} This case study thus blinds the relative efficacy of portraiture to foster emotional restitution, only loosely suggesting that portrait photography plays a role. Finally, many of the included studies tend to focus on “verbal information” that is elicited from interviews in conjunction in photography. Thus, significant further research is necessary to isolate photography, and to that end, portrait photography, to examine its true efficacy in promoting well-being.¹⁴

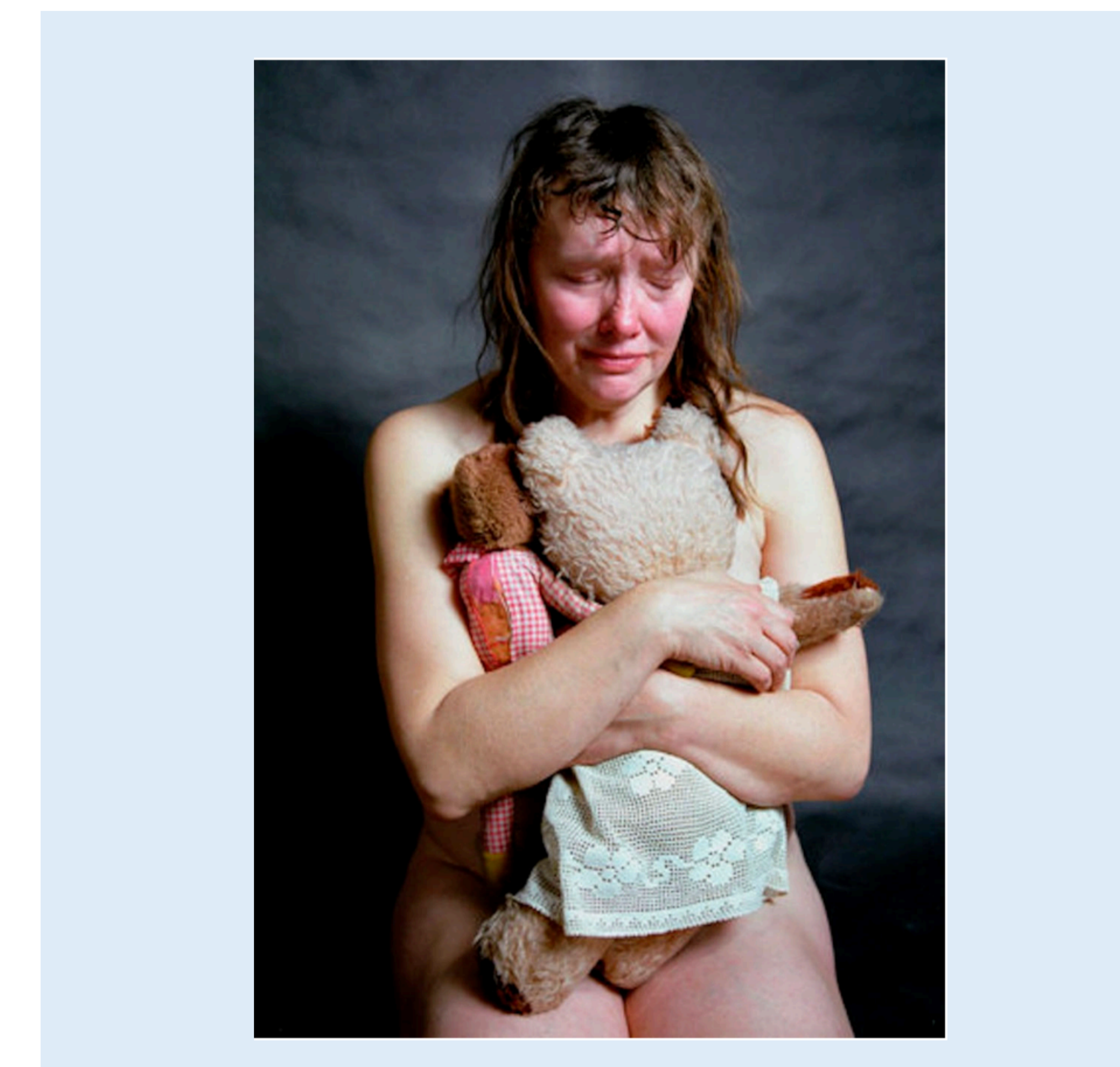


Figure 3: Jo Spence, from ‘Narratives of Disease’ by Spence and Sheard (referenced in Carr, 2017). Example of photographic self-portrait

CONCLUSION

1. Various Photographic Techniques have been utilized and both experimentally/qualitatively studied to support well-being and healing
2. Techniques most prevalent in the literature include **Photovoice** and **Photo-Elicitation/Participatory Photography**
3. Further experimental research in the utilization of portrait photography is required to examine correlation with increased well-being or healing
4. Additional qualitative studies should also be conducted to further establish portrait photography as a axillary tool for healing

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