



# Photography-Based Approaches in Health Research

Techniques and Application

Lucian Hadrian Milasan

# PHOTOGRAPHY-BASED APPROACHES IN HEALTH RESEARCH

This groundbreaking guide introduces health researchers and students to innovative photography-based research methods in healthcare, capitalising on photographic techniques' advantages over traditional approaches. The book provides a structured framework currently lacking in healthcare research, offering comprehensive guidance for navigating this emerging methodological landscape.

*Photography-Based Approaches in Health Research: Techniques and Applications* explores diverse photography-based methodologies, including photo-elicitation, photovoice, visual ethnography, photographic collage, and photo-storytelling. It examines the interconnection between photography and phenomenology in health research, providing historical context while exploring future developments in artificial intelligence applications. Authentic case studies from the author's mental health research and lived experience enhance real-world applicability, while the final chapter offers practical exercises for immediate application. A dedicated chapter addresses the complex ethical considerations inherent in photographic research methods.

This essential resource serves health researchers, graduate students, and academics in public health, nursing, medicine, psychology, and health and allied professions. The practical guidance for planning, designing, and conducting photography-based research makes it invaluable for qualitative researchers, visual methodologists, and anyone seeking to integrate visual and textual data in healthcare and well-being studies, offering clear frameworks for formulating research questions, collecting and analysing data, and reporting findings.

**Dr Lucian Hadrian Milasan** is a senior lecturer in mental health nursing and a qualitative researcher at Nottingham Trent University (the Institute of Health and Allied Professions), where he teaches and contributes to mental health practice and research modules at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.



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*Lucian Hadrian Milasan*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Lucian Hadrian Milasan is a senior lecturer in mental health nursing at Nottingham Trent University (the Institute of Health and Allied Professions), where he teaches and contributes to mental health practice and research modules at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He is a visual and qualitative researcher with a strong focus on lived experiences of mental distress and mental health recovery. Dr Milasan specialises in integrating photography-based methods such as photo-elicitation and photovoice with qualitative approaches, particularly phenomenology and post-phenomenology. His research portfolio in this area is steadily expanding and includes a systematic review on the use of photography in mental health research (Milasan et al., 2022); cultural explorations of experiences and meanings of recovery and resilience (Milasan, 2023; Milasan & Finta, 2025); and a methodological article on the therapeutic benefits of photography as a research tool (Milasan, 2024a), to name only a few. He has also authored several book chapters, including work on photo-elicitation in healthcare research (Milasan, 2022) and an exploration of artificial intelligence in phototherapy and therapeutic photography (Milasan, 2026). Currently, Dr Milasan is investigating the evolution of visual and photographic research methods in the context of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (Milasan, 2024b) – work that contributes to a contemporary understanding of photography as a research method within a rapidly advancing digital landscape. Committed to producing accessible, innovative, and inspiring scholarship, Dr Milasan continues to publish work that informs academics, health practitioners, researchers, and students across health and allied professions.

## Selection of author's works

- Milasan, L. H. (2022). Photo-elicitation: Unleashing imagery in healthcare research. In K. Hinsliff-Smith, McGarry, J., & Ali, P. (Eds.), *Arts based health care research: A multidisciplinary perspective* (pp. 51–67). Springer. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-94423-0\\_5](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-94423-0_5)
- Milasan, L. H. (2023). “Mending fractured personalities”: A photography-based cultural study of recovery from mental distress in Romania. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 60(2), 226–243. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634615221119373>

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- Milasan, L. H., & Finta, O. (2025). "Rising like Phoenix from the ashes": An arts-based qualitative study of mental health resilience and recovery in Romania. *Qualitative Health Research* [e-pub]. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323251355120>

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This book was born from the light and shadows of my photographic journey – therapeutic and research – and from the voices of those who walked beside me, people who opened my eyes to photography not only as an art but also as a language of healing and inquiry. Some of these people remain concealed behind pseudonyms, yet their presence lingers in every page. To them, I offer my deepest gratitude.

I am indebted to the ambassadors of photography at the Estuar Foundation who contributed to this book with their creations – Laura, Rodion, Călin, Mihai, Robert, and Judit – guided with care by Orsolya Finta, social worker and manager of the Day Centre in Cluj-Napoca, Romania – a hub of creativity and healing. It was there that my own journey began with my first photography group that showed me the value of photography not only for aesthetics and technical skills but also as a way to open doors to meaning, connection, and transformation.

My thanks extend to my colleagues at the Institute of Health and Allied Professions at Nottingham Trent University. I want to particularly thank Prof Jayne Brown, whose mentorship and wisdom shaped the path that led me to bring photography back to the heart of my research. I would also like to add here many thanks to Prof Del Lowenthal – Emeritus Professor of Psychotherapy and Counselling at the University of Roehampton, London – for his foreword and his inspiring work on the therapeutic power of photography.

Writing this book was a rollercoaster with its highs and lows, with days oozing with ideas and days when pages were staring blankly at me. I am fortunate to be surrounded by family and friends who reminded me of the worth of this work, even when I could not see it myself. I would like to thank my nephew, Nicholas, for his visual contributions that hopefully opened his appetite for photography. And a special thanks to Craig, my steadfast listener and support through life's many storms.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my faithful companion, Freya, a welcome distraction who ensured I take regular screen breaks. She agreed with a bark to let some of her pictures appear in this book in exchange for a handful of her favourite treats.

# FOREWORD

When I first saw the proposal for this book, I was immediately taken, which is not my usual experience, with both the importance of its subject matter and its clarity.

In recent years, we have witnessed a growing acknowledgement – both within psychotherapy and the wider field of health research – that not all experience can be adequately grasped through words alone. Much of what matters in human suffering, care, and recovery is tacit, embodied, and pre-reflective. Photography, with its capacity to arrest a moment while simultaneously revealing what exceeds representation, offers a distinctive way of approaching these dimensions. It is therefore a pleasure to introduce this book – *Photography-Based Approaches in Health Research: Techniques and Applications* – which brings together a thoughtful and comprehensive account of how images can deepen our understanding of health, illness, and the human condition.

My own work in therapeutic photography and critical practice has long been concerned with the ways in which visual methods can make present what is ordinarily marginalised in research: the unspoken, the affective, and the relational. What we often find, whether in therapeutic encounters or other research contexts, is that photographs open a different kind of dialogue – one that situates meaning not only in narratives but also in textures, atmospheres, and the ambiguities that resist tidy interpretation. This book recognises that potential and provides a rigorous framework for working with such complexity. Furthermore, here we can see photographic research as methods in their own right and not just as important adjuncts to the more standard non-visual approaches.

Importantly, Dr Milasan does not present photography as a neutral or purely technical tool. Instead, the book situates photographic methods within philosophical and ethical considerations important for any researcher working in healthcare. The chapter on philosophical underpinnings and historical evolution of photography as a research method is particularly significant. It reminds us that to use photography in research is not merely to collect data but to enter into a relationship – often asymmetrical – with participants, their images, and their lived realities. The ethical chapter of this book is therefore not an add-on; it is integral to the work.

Photography-based approaches are also shown here to have therapeutic relevance. Whether through photovoice with marginalised communities, photo-elicitation in clinical settings, or participatory visual ethnography, images often allow participants to express experiences that may have been difficult to articulate verbally. Importantly, I do not advocate the therapeutic use of photographs when not facilitated by a trained psychotherapist who has had considerable personal therapy. Yet, given those vital caveats, I do strongly agree, as advocated in this book, that photography can foster reflexivity and agency for participants and can invite researchers to confront their own assumptions about health, illness, and representation.

As someone who has also long advocated for critical reflexivity in both therapy and research, I am particularly appreciative of the emphasis in this book on the researcher's responsibility to remain alert to the potential for (mis)representation. Photographs, as constructed images, can empower, but they can also objectify; they can reveal, but they can also conceal. The chapter dealing with artificial intelligence (AI) introduces an additional layer of complexity, reminding us that the image is no longer simply captured but increasingly generated, manipulated, and algorithmically interpreted. In an era when visual technologies are becoming more pervasive, Dr Milasan's careful discussion of the methodological and ethical implications of AI is timely and necessary.

Readers will also find the final chapter extremely valuable for teaching and practice. The worked examples, exercises, and applied activities offer pragmatic guidance without losing sight of the philosophical and ethical commitments that underpin the whole book. This combination of conceptual depth and practical clarity is rare and welcome.

In bringing together diverse photographic methods – photo-elicitation, photovoice, visual ethnography, photo-storytelling, and more – this book provides a unique point of reference for healthcare researchers, practitioners, and students alike. More than an instructional guide, it invites us to consider what it means to “see” in healthcare and what might become possible when we allow images to speak not just to us but with us.

It is my hope that readers will not only learn techniques from these pages but will also be encouraged to adopt a more questioning, ethically attuned, and relationally sensitive approach to photography-based research. For in the end, the value of such work lies not only in what is shown but also in the human encounters – and responsibilities – that emerge in the very looking of being.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Photography-Based Approaches in Health Research: Techniques and Applications* represents the culmination of a long and deeply personal journey in which photography has been my constant companion across the many roles I inhabit(ed) – student, commercial photographer, mental health professional, reviewer, healthcare educator, supervisor, researcher, and expert by experience. Photography has always been present in my life, including during my own battle with myasthenia gravis and depression – experiences that revealed the therapeutic potential of photography and inspired me to explore its role in mental health during my doctoral studies.

My PhD thesis (Milasan, 2020) highlighted a critical gap – the literature on methodological aspects of using photography in health-related research, and not only, was fragmented and inconsistent. Like many early-career and established researchers, I sought a rigorous, coherent framework for integrating photography into health research. Instead, I often encountered literature that was disjointed, incomplete, sometimes contradictory, and variable in quality and reliability. This book is my response to that challenge – a structured, evidence-informed resource for health researchers, practitioners, and students who wish to master photography as a meaningful research tool.

## **Aims and objectives**

In this book, I aim to address this gap in the literature on using photography-based research methods in healthcare research by providing a clear and structured methodological framework that is currently lacking. The book capitalises on the advantages and methodological potential of photographic techniques (compared to traditional methods) that are increasingly used for exploring health phenomena.

The objectives that guided me throughout writing this book are:

- To explore the historical evolution and philosophical underpinnings of photography as a research method in healthcare research.
- To outline a rationale for using photographic techniques in health research by emphasising the advantages and potential they have compared to non-photographic approaches.