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Using Personal Snapshots and Family Photographs as Therapy Tools: The "Why, What, and How" of PhotoTherapy Techniques*

Photographs are footprints of our minds, mirrors of our lives, reflections from our hearts, frozen memories that we can hold in silent stillness in our hands – forever if we wish. They document not only where we have been, but also point the way to where we might perhaps be going, whether we realize this yet or not...

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Introduction

The reason for the existence of any photograph (its "meaning", its "story") can never be totally objectively known or predicted, especially by an outside observer who was not initially involved in any portion of that image's creation. In this sense, a camera's lens always focus-

es inward at least as much as it does outward toward the subject of the photographer's gaze. No matter how rich the surface is with visual details, a photograph, once given tangible fixed form, will never be able to fully duplicate the complete slice of life its photographer was attempting to record.

Since each viewer's response to a photograph is based upon uniquely individual perceptions (even if that viewer happened to also be the photographer who created it), the actual meaning of any photograph therefore exists only as an unobservable, though not necessarily random, intersection of sensory-coded associations that occur *solely* in the intangible interface between the mind of each viewer and that particular image itself.

From Quantum Physics comes the awareness that, when something is naturally flowing by in the form of waves of energy, any attempt to stop it in time long enough to be examined will *inexorably* change the very nature of what one is trying to observe. Similarly, trying to use a photo-

graph to freeze time (which can never be fully stopped) will achieve at best only a limited approximation of the moment (and emotions) that the photographer was trying to capture.

Feelings themselves are transient, unless a camera captures their behavioral or affective manifestations. It is actually only their visual "traces" that appear on film. What is visible in a photograph is only the time-imprint left behind by the moment just passed.

Thus, instead of showing what truly existed in front of the lens, the image captures only the light reflected back from these things. However, awareness of this differentiation is usually lost in the split-second interaction between human and snapshot, which somewhat holographically creates the meaning that is believed to be residing in the photograph itself.

Because people's feelings similarly exist as ever-flowing waves of sensory energy, their cognitive awareness about these (their thoughts and words about what they feel) can

only be incomplete attempts to fully represent what is felt inside (as no words could ever fully explain or describe them).

As is so evident in the inability of people to speak about their intense reactions to any personal (or environmental) devastation, it is not easy to represent ("re-present"; present again the exact same way) one's inner experiences out to others using only an externalized verbal form of communication (language). People are usually literally speechless under such extreme emotional circumstances; however, the information sensorially bombarding their brains (and bodies) during such times, nevertheless continues to enter and be stored there, deeply affecting them while awaiting something *other than words* to access, unlock and communicate what is nonverbally held and felt deep inside.

More particularly, if one is attempting to do this using a common verbal code of a mutually spoken/written language (i.e., speaking or writing), this will always be de-

pendent upon mutual agreement between the sender and the receiver of that communication about what those words actually mean.

In other words, language is "a translation of a translation of an experience" that originated solely as only a directly-experienced *nonverbal sensory* input -- thus it is always difficult to discuss in words what naturally exists inside people without words needing to encode first.

From this, it should be obvious that any attempt to use words to give full voice to feelings will automatically interrupt their natural flow and thus inexorably and directly change their nature, simply *because* they are being observed and being forced into thought-translations (cognitive frameworks) that can never fully contain them.

And the reverse is also true: trying to use words to precipitate or create feelings will usually not fully succeed, because it is basically impossible to simultaneously talk about something and feel it at the same time. This is also one reason why people who are having problems in their

personal lives, who find it hard to explain or resolve these difficulties through logical reasoning or discussions with friends or family, will often turn in frustration to various mental health professionals for help.

And, this is also the reason why any therapy process done to help them, if based *only* on verbal interaction between client and therapist, will probably never be as efficient as when that language of therapeutic communication can also include the use of additional visual-symbolic representations that can metaphorically bridge into the unconscious, into places where words do not (and cannot) go.

The Arts (and Art Therapy)

Since the arts are often used as a symbolic language to express that which words cannot tell, several other-than-verbal therapy techniques have evolved during the past several decades, which improve upon the verbal therapy process that used to be a therapist's only choice.

Sometimes the creative arts are used *as* the therapy itself (whether for cathartic purposes, or simply just giving some sense of mastery of the medium), while other times they are used within a wider therapy process, under the guidance of a trained mental health professional who selects a particular expressive medium because they have been trained to recognize what would be the most appropriate tool to use under those client circumstances.

"Art Therapy" is one of the most successful of these non-verbal therapies, basing its foundations on the concept that the natural language of the unconscious is coded not

so much in words, but rather in visually-symbolic representations of experience. Art Therapists believe that artistic expression using any of the "translating" arts media – drawing, painting and so forth – allow feelings to take form, and thus a more truly correlational language to emerge, as a more natural link for communicating with people's subconscious processes.

"The therapist's task is to use the images to learn the client's symbolic language and then use these to help them understand what is going on inside themselves."¹

As probably the most publicly familiar and emotionally powerful artistic medium, photography has evolved during this same time period as a natural adjunctive tool to assist not only Art Therapists (who often combine the two media in their own "Photo Art Therapy" practice or training programs), but also for other therapists who have not been otherwise trained to involve the arts in their work.

But it is important to recognize that this therapeutic suc-

cess is due to using photography as personally-symbolic emotional communication – and thus the *artistic* merits of such photographs (their "art part") turn out to be completely irrelevant for how they are used as adjunctive tools in therapy.

Over the past four decades, using ordinary personal snapshots and family photographs during the therapy process ("*PhotoTherapy*"²) has emerged to be an extremely useful and effective set of techniques to help people achieve improved well-being. And the newly-developed field of "*Photo Art Therapy*"³ shows how these techniques can be especially beneficial to those therapists who have taken additional specialized training in Art Therapy itself.

Both make use of therapy clients' own personal snapshots and family photos – and the feelings, memories, thoughts and information these evoke – as catalysts for therapeutic communication during the therapy process.

As long as these images illustrate and document clients' inner and outer lives, their actual physical condition or compositional or esthetic components simply do not matter for PhotoTherapeutic purposes. This is because PhotoTherapy is about photography-as-communication, rather than about photography-as-art.

Since PhotoTherapy is not a field ("noun") – nor is it a set of fixed directives based upon only one specific theoretical modality or therapeutic paradigm – but rather a collection of flexible techniques, it can be used by *any* kind of trained mental health therapist, regardless of their conceptual orientation, profession of choice, preferred intervention model or approach, or degree of prior familiarity with photography itself.

Whereas most Art Therapy training programs require, as a prerequisite of student acceptance, that the applicant first present a portfolio of their own art as evidence of their skill and competency in one or more creative arts media, training in PhotoTherapy techniques requires only

that the trainee simply already know what a photograph is and what cameras do – and that they already be fully trained in their therapy profession of choice before beginning to learn these adjunctive tools.

This is one of the major differences between PhotoTherapy and Art Therapy, and it is a significant one because it permits PhotoTherapy techniques to be used successfully (and competently) by a variety of mental health professionals, even those not specifically trained in Art Therapy itself.⁴

However, it is also important to remember, when studying this framework, that PhotoTherapy and Art Therapy are not mutually exclusive -- rather, they are integrally interrelated, reciprocal sub-sets of each other, even though different in both product and process because two different kinds of media are used. They both work on the basis of giving visual form to feelings and making the invisible more visible – they just do this differently.

Photographs (and Photography)

To best understand the power of ordinary snapshots to communicate more deeply in the process of helping people than words alone ever can, it is important to pause briefly to examine their nature. A photograph is a rather curious thing: a very thin piece of paper that is perceived three-dimensionally as if alive, as if what is visible on its surface is happening at the very moment it is being viewed and as if the viewer is right there, participating in that scene, watching it through their own eyes at the present moment – even if the picture is from long ago.

Since the scene is always perceived as if it is the viewer's eyes themselves that are doing the looking, the viewer is usually not aware of any mechanical device (camera) mediating their "seeing" process. Viewing the visual contents of the snapshot is usually perceived as viewing those things *themselves*, as these are deeply and inseparably

connected. For this reason, a photograph becomes a natural "transitional object," bridging realities without its viewer even realizing this is happening. This lends a quality of "proof" to photographic artifacts that is both certain, and yet at the same time, untrue.

A photograph, then, has the special quality of being simultaneously a realistic illusion and an illusory reality, a moment captured from within time, yet never fully capable of being captured in its pure form. People use film to stop time, which cannot be stopped. Photographs are emotionally "charged" as if electromagnetically etched, and thus people can never view their own personal photos dispassionately. Each is only a simple piece of paper with some dried gooey stuff smeared on one side, yet the feelings imbedded in it are intensely complex.

These small pieces of paper are empowered with a presence far beyond their apparent tangible value as artifacts; their significance resonates to and from people, out of the past and into the future. It is therefore quite un-

derstandable that people treat these visual artifacts as if these were full of life, grieving them when lost, sending them to others as "stand-ins" when not able to be there in person, and creating them for the special purpose of keeping certain moments alive, forever.

These aspects are crucial for understanding why (and how) photographs can be such useful healing tools: they permit the complex examination of a slice of time frozen forever on film as "fact," and yet at the same time allow an endless variety of "realities" to be revealed each time the same photo is viewed. In this sense, every snapshot has stories to tell, secrets to share and memories to bring forth, if only it is asked the right kinds of "opener" questions. Such information is latent in all clients' personal photos, but when it can be used to focus and precipitate therapeutic dialogue, a more direct and less censored connection with the unconscious will usually result.

Using Photographs in Therapeutic Practice

During PhotoTherapy sessions, clients don't just sit and silently contemplate existing photos, but also take or create new ones, including those that are posed for, talked with, listened to, actively reconstructed, visually sculpted, revised to form or illustrate new narratives, collected or appropriated on assignment, re-visualized in memory or imagination, integrated into art therapy expressions or even set into animated dialogue with other photos -- but *always* doing this only under the guidance of a mental health professional who has received special training in how to do this safely, so that the process does not become overwhelming.

Then, after working with the client's photos in that particular session, the therapist might choose to assign further photo-based tasks to continue along the therapeutic path. And surely additional applications will appear once

therapists and counselors become more comfortable using various still or motion digital technologies.

The photos that people take (or collect as postcards, posters, greeting cards, magazine pages, calendar pictures and so forth) signify something about themselves too, because these were made or gathered precisely because some aspect of that moment mattered enough to them to warrant recording. Therefore, seen as a collection, these constitute almost a "self-portrait" reflection of their owner, in that people usually will not keep photos around that they don't like, or those that don't matter to them. The ones that are kept because they are special also express many things about their keeper's life that can be explained in more depth, if only the right kinds of exploratory questions are asked.

When people pose for photos, even those they take of themselves, they usually have certain ideas of how they want to look in the final picture, and these represent how they hope to be perceived by other people in real life.

Therefore, asking people questions about photos of themselves can be a good way to find out their own inner value system and related beliefs, self-evaluations, personal judgments and resultant expectations against all of which their future changes will be measured.

Frequently, in PhotoTherapeutic process, clients' explanations about the true meaning of a particular photo turns out to be far less significant than their reasons *why* this is true (and how they know for certain that it *is* true). A lot can be learned as they talk about what their snapshots are *about* emotionally, in addition to what they are *of* visually.

In reviewing their personal and family snapshots, or hearing the feedback of others' responses to these images, clients often learn things about themselves that they were not conscious of when they first acquired or took the photographs. Things that are later obviously visible were perhaps only potentially "there" at the original moment of "time-freezing." All of this can be used for therapeutic

benefit by a therapist who knows how to properly use clients' interaction with their own snapshots and family photos to help them "get a better picture" of their life.

People's inner construction of themselves is what frames their reality. How people believe the world to be, will influence and filter everything going into or out of their mind. Thus, not studying and discussing the photographs that clients take, collect, find meaningful and produce from unconscious stimuli, will most certainly leave out a tremendous amount of valuable information necessary for doing therapeutic "personal construct" work with them.

From this understanding it becomes obvious that any therapist wanting to help clients strengthen their self-esteem and self-regard, and explore how they present themselves to others would be slighting that client to not make use of their self-portraits and other people's pictures of them in order to help them confront and then process any dissonance that may symbolically suggest reasons for some of

their difficulties.

Similarly, any therapist who interacts only verbally with clients in trying to help them make sense of the narratives of their life, the stories they use to construct their identities (and explain their problems), will lose many opportunities if they do not also explore personal photographs and family albums.

And any therapist who wants to help clients find out more about what differentiates them as individuals apart from their various family systems, cultural contexts or society-mandated roles and expectations that have previously shaped them, needs to remember that clues to this information (and their enculturation/socialization) can usually be found embedded in their snapshots and albums.

Of course, it is not just the factual answers to therapists' questions that will be so therapeutically valuable for clients, but also the entire process of what takes place in uncovering the reasons for those answers. This is because interacting with snapshots often reveals additional valua-

ble information and emotional affect almost as accidental by-products to the investigative process being engaged in. In summary, therapists who are able to regard their clients' photographs as starting-points, rather than finished end-products, and who can use these to initiate open-ended questions, explore feelings, attitudes and beliefs and stimulate additional creative expressions that gives clearer form to unconscious process deep inside, will discover more about their clients than they could have learned without using these personal and family photos as their activating tools.

PhotoTherapy, Photo Art Therapy, and Therapeutic Photography Techniques

PhotoTherapy techniques are *therapy practices* that use people's personal snapshots, family albums, and pictures taken by others (and the feelings, thoughts, and memories these photos evoke) as catalysts to deepen insight and enhance communication during their therapy sessions (conducted by trained mental health professionals), in ways not possible using words alone.

Photo Art Therapy techniques are *art therapy practices* based on a specialized adaptation of PhotoTherapy techniques that are used *only* by those with additional specialized postgraduate training in Art Therapy. It is important to clarify that PhotoTherapy is not just simply a sub-field of Art Therapy (it is not just "art therapy with a camera"). Instead, there are significant differences between the two, although also a great amount of similarity.

Therapeutic Photography techniques are *photographic*

practices done by people themselves (in situations where the skills of a trained therapist or counselor are not needed) to increase their own self-knowledge and awareness, activate positive social change, strengthen communities, improve intercultural relations, reduce conflict, bring attention to issues of social justice, deepen visual literacy, enhance education, expand qualitative research methodologies and produce other kinds of photo-based healing or learning.

Not limited to only "paper photographs", all these techniques can be used with any kind of photographic imagery, both still and moving – including applications in *VideoTherapy* and/or *Therapeutic Videography* work, digital photos, cell phone pictures, DVDs, films – as well as newer technologies yet to be invented...

It is very easy to distinguish between these three photo-based healing techniques: the first two (PhotoTherapy and Photo Art Therapy) both require that a therapist be involved – and the process of using photos have an inten-

tional therapeutic plan – while the third (Therapeutic Photography) doesn't. And the difference between the first two is that the additional specialized training of Art Therapists means that they have been specifically taught to how to involve the other arts in their PhotoTherapy practice with clients, while the much more common practice of using PhotoTherapy techniques can be done by *any* trained therapist or other mental health professional, even those with absolutely no knowledge or previous experience with the arts.

In comparing *PhotoTherapy* and *Therapeutic Photography* practices,⁵ it must be understood that PhotoTherapy and Therapeutic Photography are not "opposites" – instead the two should be thought of as being the endpoints of one long "continuum of photo-based healing practices", with PhotoTherapy (using-photographs-*during*-therapy) at one end, and "Therapeutic Photography" (using-photographs-*as*-therapy) at the other, with a lot of overlap in the middle (and some therapists even

combining both methods together in the same practice). They are simply two contrasting ways of using emotional information that is unconsciously embedded in people's personal photographs: PhotoTherapy (being a therapy practice) requires the skills of professionally-trained therapist or counselor to guide what happens, while Therapeutic Photography (being a photography practice) does not. But both are based on photos being a much richer (and safer) way to explore feelings than words alone could ever provide.

Since readers can find more thorough discussions of this comparison elsewhere, I will now focus the remainder of this article on *only* PhotoTherapy practices, since that is my particular specialty field as a therapist, trainer, consultant, and educator.

How Photos are Used in PhotoTherapy Practice

Clients' snapshots not only provide factual details about their life, but also are invisibly encoded with numerous "filters" unconsciously used to help make sense of everything (and everyone) in it. Since these filters, taken as a whole, represent a "map" of clients' underlying value system and related belief structure (which is where any initiative for therapeutic change has to start), their personal photographic images always are operating at two levels simultaneously: concretely and symbolically, which makes them uniquely effective therapeutic tools because there is no need to separate the two (nor would this even be possible).

PhotoTherapy is *not* about interpreting people's photos for them; instead, the input should always come from the client, guided by their therapist's photo-stimulated questions, while both explore the image (and its emotional impact) together. The perceptions (and associated feel-

ings) each photo triggers in a client (or therapist) will be personally unique, and since there is therefore no inherently wrong way to interpret a particular photo's meaning, no external interpretive criteria can ever be used to "objectively" evaluate or measure a client's perception of it.

Similarly, a person's reaction to a photo cannot, on its own, indicate any definite diagnostic problem or mental condition, and thus no assumptions or assessments should ever be generalized from singular responses. Instead, therapists trained in PhotoTherapy techniques are taught to look for patterns of responses, repeated themes and consistencies through time (and often generations), for unusual or symbolic content and, most of all, for emotional reactions indicating inner feelings that the clients may or may not be aware of.

Therefore, what for photographers is usually an end-point (the finished photo) is, for PhotoTherapeutic purposes, just the beginning – making the photos, or bringing them

along to the therapy session, is certainly not all that happens. Once the photo can be viewed, the next step is to activate all that it brings to mind: exploring its visual messages, entering into dialogues with it, asking it questions, considering the results of imagined changes or different viewpoints and using additional art media tools to "get a better picture" of what that photo is about.

Thus, it is not just the visual contents of the photographs themselves that are so therapeutically important, but also everything that happens while the client is interacting with them. Memories, feelings and thoughts that emerge during the photographic dialogue can sometimes be more therapeutically relevant than the image-reactions themselves.

And of course each therapist-practitioner will visualize the system of PhotoTherapeutic applications from inside their own preferred therapeutic modalities and concepts of therapeutic goals, as well as the preferred conceptual framework underlying their own particular theoretical

stance, especially if their profession is not Art Therapy in the first place.

The Framework of PhotoTherapy Techniques

PhotoTherapy consists of five techniques that are best used in various combinations depending on each client situation and therapist's preferred way of working. Like the fingers of a hand, the five PhotoTherapy techniques are interrelated and interdependent, and work best when synergistically combined. Each therapist using PhotoTherapy techniques will use them a bit differently, depending upon that person's own professional training and theoretical preferences, as well as each client's particular therapeutic situational needs and goals. Thus, there isn't only one fixed correct way to use these techniques (as long as the client is treated ethically), nor are there any requirements about applying them in any particular sequence or

combination.

Each kind of photograph (technique) discussed below has its unique benefits and limitations, and each can be worked with not only on its own, but also in combination with the other four techniques – as well as combined with various expressive arts media or otherwise-appropriated imagery, in order to additionally enhance the therapeutic process. Once trained, therapists from a variety of different mental health professions will certainly develop their own approach for applying these techniques most appropriately in their particular kind of client-helping.

Since the distinct parts of this interrelated system are so intertwined and synergistic, it's rather difficult to teach them one by one; yet they must be temporarily parted in order to explain how each works (and why). The descriptions below can only provide a brief overview,⁶ but it is important to stress that these techniques are best learned by doing them in experiential training -- to learn how they feel oneself, before starting to use them with a client.⁷

Very simply, the five basic techniques of PhotoTherapy are directly related to the various relationships possible between person and camera (or, person and photograph) – although in practice these categories often naturally overlap:

1. *Photos that have been taken or created by the client (whether actually using a camera to make the picture, or "taking" (appropriating) other people's images through collecting "found" photos from magazines, postcards, Internet imagery, digital manipulation, and so forth).*

Since every photograph someone takes is also a type of self-portrait reflecting something about them (or they wouldn't have bothered taking it!), each also secretly contains information about the person who made it. Whether consciously made or not, every decision about where, when, who, how and most importantly, why to make (or keep) a particular photograph, has the power to communicate as much about its creator as it does about the sub-

ject matter being recorded on film.

In addition to working with photos that clients have taken with their own camera or brought to therapy from their personal collection of "found" imagery, this technique can also include working with photographs that have been photocopied, collaged, digitally-created, electronically-scanned or otherwise appropriated for re-use. Therapists not only explore the "facts" of their clients' snapshots, but also look for larger patterns of repeated themes, personal symbols and metaphors, and other visual information that the client might have been unaware of at the time of taking or finding the picture.

Whether clients bring in already-taken photos on their own initiative, or at the therapist's request, these can be used to focus discussions about things in their life beyond what appears in their photos. In addition to looking at the tangible photos that clients bring along to the therapy session, therapists can also design more active client photo-taking, -making or -gathering "homework" assign-

ments tailored toward certain specific goals or issues they want the client to explore in greater depth. Photographing what affects them gives clients more control over its unknown or unexpected aspects. When the photo helps them bring these things "outside" themselves, this gives them a better viewpoint from which to explore such things more safely.

2. Photos which have been taken of the client by other people (whether posed on purpose or captured spontaneously while the person was unaware of being photographed – but where other people (not the client) made all the decisions about timing, content, location, and so forth).

Photos of people, taken by others, let them see the many different ways that other people see them (as well as how they look to themselves when not reversed in a mirror). People rarely take the time to consider how they unconsciously visually communicate information about them-

selves to other people who see them (or view photos of them), yet many of these "silent messages" directly influence how others will perceive them. People are frequently surprised to see, in a photograph of themselves, quite a different "self" than what they thought they had been showing to others.

It can be therapeutically useful for people to compare posed with un-posed photos of themselves, as well as photos of them taken by a variety of different photographers, in order to see how each photographer's images (perceptions) of them differ – and what this might say about the different relationships they have with each photographer involved. It also might be worth exploring how a person would alter their usual behavior, appearance or body language if suddenly aware that someone is photographing them.

Since this technique involves photos of clients where someone other than themselves made most of the choices about when, where, how, why (or even if) they are to be

photographed, the client has much less control over the results, even when posing for that photographer.

Photographs taken of clients tangibly represent the power dynamics of the personal relationships between them as the "subject" and the photographer whose gaze through the lens has made them the object of attention (willingly or not). "Subject" and "object" become terms containing multiple meanings when one person "takes" another's picture (and thus some power over that image).

Photos of clients alone can be compared with photos of them in the company of others, and spontaneously-taken snapshots with more formally-posed ones. Whether taken in professional portrait studios or informally by friends or relatives, photos of clients can be worked with not only "as is," but also, if desired, re-made anew to explore any changes as therapy progresses.

3. Self-portraits, which means any kind of photos that clients have made of themselves, either literally or metaphorically – but in all cases where they themselves had

total control and power over all aspects of the image's creation.

Photos of a person, taken by themselves without any outside interference (i.e., "self-portraits") let them explore who they are when they know no one else is watching, judging the results, or attempting to control the process. Whether these photos are made spontaneously with an instant camera during the therapy session, or taken or collected later in response to their therapist's "homework assignments," each image will be an exploration of some different facet or aspect of themselves, by themselves, rather than "tainted" by the input of someone else.

Since issues connected to self-esteem, self-knowledge, self-confidence and self-acceptance lie at the core of most clients' problems, being able to see themselves for themselves, un-filtered by the input or feedback of others, can be very powerful and therapeutically beneficial. Because self-portraits permit direct nonverbal self-confrontation, they can be not only validating and empowering, but also

the most threatening and risky kinds of photos to open one's emotions to – which is precisely the reason they are such quick and effective activators of deep process work in therapy situations.

Carefully guided while at perhaps their most vulnerable moments of self-encounter, where defensive rationalization is difficult (because there is no one else "there" to shift blame onto), clients can use self-created photos to internally dialogue with themselves using their own private inner language, exploring on their own any resulting consequences or discoveries, without anyone else having to know. And when such "face-to-face" meetings are contained and guided by a therapist aware of that client's particular issues, they truly are able to get a "better picture" of themselves.

4. *Family album and other photo-biographical collections (whether of birth family or "family of choice"; whether formally kept in albums or more "loosely" com-*

bined into narratives by placement on walls or refrigerator doors, inside wallets or frames, into computer screens or family websites, and so forth) – which were put together for the purpose of documenting the personal narrative of the client's life and the background from which they developed.

This kind of linked grouping of photos into albums (or similar "joined collections" as constructed entities) has potential therapeutic value far greater than just as a simple one-by-one linear summation of the individual images which comprise them.

Photo albums and other similar collections of "family history" snapshots are of course just a collection of the previous three kinds of individual photographs (those made by people, and of people – self-portraits, of course being a combination of both), but when these are put into orderly sequence that collectively forms a "bigger picture" such as an album, they all take on a secondary life whose scope as a narrative story and complex system reaches far beyond

that of any particular single kind of photograph covered by any of the other four PhotoTherapy techniques.

For this reason, working with family and other autobiographical photographs must be treated as a separate technique for the purposes of PhotoTherapy work, even though any single image can of course also be worked with individually as its own particular type, using any of the other four techniques.

Albums mark those special moments, places, people (and pets) that have mattered most to the life of the family it represents – or, rather, to the life of the person who created that album (their way). Its pages present not only individuals by themselves, but also as they fit within numerous larger contexts and family systems that define who they are collectively (within that family's relationship-matrix) even when seemingly alone. In many ways, a family's album is their (metaphoric) home – and their foundation for identity as well.

Albums are usually constructed to show families at their

best, with the accompanying silent subtext that "things are always this way" (though real family relationships are rarely so ideal). A narrative/constructivist perspective suggests that any story is created by a sequence of sentences whose importance lies not just in their selection of specific words, but also in the order in which these appear (each always having been contexted by all previous ones and inter-relationships thereof).

If "words" is replaced by "snapshots" in the sentence above, it can easily be seen how a family's album is not so much an artifact of objectivity, but rather a personal construction of the album's maker, in order to tell the story of that family in that particular way. Thus, a different family member would likely use the same individual snapshots to tell an altogether different story, from their own differing viewpoint. Therefore, the story constructed inside its pages will always be a selectively-told one.

As the generalized, idealized version of the family history presented in the family album is rarely the same as the

individualized memories kept inside each client's own mind, it can be very useful to ask clients to go back and reconstruct the album their way and "re-member" its parts (put its parts "back together again") according to their own version of what took place over the years.

Helping people see themselves inside their own personal-historical contexts often helps them better understand their current situations and feelings (and perhaps recognize where some of their expectations and judgments are coming from).

Albums can reveal physical similarities and other thematic patterns repeating across the pages. They also contain "forgotten" people, secrets, myths, "closets," juicy anecdotes, along with occasional mis-truths – and therefore what has been omitted (or silenced) on their pages is sometimes more therapeutically significant than what actually appears there.

For example, therapists trained in one of the Family Systems models of therapy will find family albums a particu-

larly rich source of information about dynamics such as fusion/differentiation issues, triangulation patterns, gender-role expectations, "unfinished business", family "scripts", and many other useful tangible crystallizations of emotional communications in that family.

Albums are proof of people's very existence; they will easily outlive the human lives inside the pages, and thus people's albums tell the world that they lived, and their lives had value. In this way, using such photos to assist the process of life review and reminiscence can help people re-focus their perspective *off* the immediate moment of crisis and instead observe the rhythms of the larger natural flow of life. They allow people to review ("re-view") their experiences and accomplishments, their connections and relationships with others, and to be able to discover some meaning and purpose in their life.

5. *"Photo-Projectives," the fifth and final PhotoTherapy technique, is based on the phenomenological fact that the*

meaning of any photo is primarily created by its viewer during their process of viewing or taking it (or even just planning it) – and thus any photograph that draws interest from client or therapist has potential value for the therapy setting.

Much like viewing the world through sunglasses whose effects are so familiar that they aren't noticed any longer (until removed), people see the world around them through similar layers of unconscious "lenses" that automatically filter everything they encounter, including their own perceptions, thoughts and feelings – even while they remain totally unaware of such things. Similarly, looking at any kind of photographic image produces perceptions and reactions that are projected from that person's own inner map of reality, which determines how they make sense of what they see.

Although "who is posing or photographing" will always determine what is documented on film, "who is looking" will always determine what is actually seen. Latent mean-

ing will only be there for those who find it there. Therefore, the "truth" of a snapshot resides not solely within it, but rather exists in the less-tangible abstract interface *between* that photo and its viewer, the "place" where each person forms their own unique responses to what they see. This process underlies all interactions between people and snapshots (or cameras), and helps reveal the ways and reasons that meaning gets perceived from any photograph in the first place. Because objective truth of any image is therefore an impossibility, no two viewers will ever get identical meaning from the same photograph.

This technique has been named "Photo-Projectives" because people *always* project meaning onto a photograph; there is simply no other way to view one. It is this quality that makes clients' reactions while looking at photos such useful as tools for therapists trying to help them make better sense out of the world around them. And this is true not only when looking at photos of themselves, those

they have taken or those in family albums, but also regarding non-client photographs such as newspaper photos, postcards, magazine advertisements, book covers and so forth, which the therapist has selected to show them for particular reasons.

In this way the "Photo-Projectives" technique is more a part of the other four techniques than it is independent onto itself, yet it must be discussed separately (and preferably taught first when training therapists and counselors to use it), as it forms the framework for all person-photo relationships.

As the Photo-Projective PhotoTherapy process demonstrates so clearly, there can be no wrong way to look at, or respond to, any photograph; therefore, there can be no wrong answers to be judged upon (by self or others). Right and wrong become purely relative terms, as photo-responses are accepted for their content rather than their correctness.

Since every interpretation is therefore correct for the per-

son giving it, this technique can be an effective tool for aiding self-awareness and self-empowerment, especially with clients long accustomed to having their perceptions devalued, disempowered or even self-doubted.

As explained in an earlier section of this article, since the meaning of any snapshot depends more on what it is about *emotionally* than what it is of *visually*, it should be no surprise that photographs will often trigger deep memories and strong feelings, along with related information that has long been buried from conscious recall. Though people rarely stop to think about why and how this happens, this is the main focus and function of photo-projective work.

Projective PhotoTherapy techniques are an ideal way for clients to safely encounter their own personal, societal, familial, class, cultural and other "filters" without being consequently devalued, demeaned, disempowered or judged by others who don't understand them. In therapeutic sessions, where clarity of communication is partic-

ularly important, it can help clients to realize that their own way of interpreting the world, or the actions of others, is not the only one possible.

Once people can accept that many people can view a single photograph quite differently, yet all be correct (each for themselves), then they can begin to understand that this process of selective perception also happens in all their ordinary daily interactions, when they view another person or a mutual situation differently from others doing the same.

*When all five techniques are considered together as one interrelated system, it can be seen how they are not just simply five distinctly separate techniques, because each one is partially formed by, and overlaps, all the others. And therefore, the most effective application of these techniques will *always* be when they are creatively combined in actual application.*

For example, as much projection of meaning takes place

when a person looks at their own self-portrait as when they look at a photo of a stranger. An album is also a collection of photos of people, by people, as well as a form of self-portrait of a family unit (even though a selectively-created one, which of course makes it a projected construction). All photos that people take are really in many ways self-portraits reflecting them. And thus all these techniques interweave back and forth into each other to form a much bigger "picture" of therapeutic possibilities.

Conclusion

Only from inside can change be initiated; only from realizing that there is more than one way to see their situation will clients find that it might help to consider it from another perspective. In order to help clients make desired changes (particularly those from minority or disenfranchised culture, class or race, or other non-mainstream realities), therapists must first be able to see the world through that client's *own* eyes (and discover the unique reality filters that selectively determine special meanings to them, even though these may not always be evident to the therapist).

Like so many holistic approaches, PhotoTherapy suffers somewhat from having to be taken apart for studying in any step-by-step order, when in fact each technique is partially formed by, and overlaps, several of the others. Therefore, the most effective application of these tech-

niques will always be when they are creatively combined⁸ – because they comprise an integrally interconnected system that is far more useful as a holistic system, than in any linear summation of its parts.

The best way to understand PhotoTherapy practice is to remember that photographs speak metaphorically and symbolically, to and from the unconscious, without any words being involved, and thus *any* photographic image can be very useful as a catalyst and stimulus for valuable therapy process. Therapists simply cannot interpret others' photos for them, although they can certainly share their own perceptions for comparing differentially-perceived realities – as long as they don't present their version as being somehow better or more true than the client's.

Good therapists do not tell their clients what to do (or how to see). Rather, they support clients as they seek their own paths or desired changes at their own speed, accompanied by their own insights (which have been

brought to light through becoming more aware of how it is that they know things in their own particular unique way) – and how these things are directly connected to their feelings and beliefs deep inside.

I believe that, if people are able to become more aware of the underlying reasons that influence the decisions they make, then they will be less "emotionally re-active" (acting without thinking) and instead do things based on being able to *think* first about why they are having certain reactions and what might be the consequences of certain actions they might decide to do.

Therapists only help people to re-discover what they already know unconsciously inside themselves, and note how their visual communications can reveal pre-existing details or patterns of their lives which were already there, but not previously available to conscious awareness. Helping them attain that awareness is the primary goal of therapy, so that clients will not need to turn to a therapist the next time a problem arises. And PhotoTherapy tech-

niques provide a very effective way for doing this...

Of course, the "what" and the "how" of photography are technically and artistically important – entire careers have been built around these topics (or educating others about them). But after over thirty years⁹ of helping people explore what their own ordinary "daily-life" snapshots (including digital ones) are *about* emotionally – in addition to what these images might incidentally also be *of* visually, the "art" part of photographs have become much less interesting to me than what people share with me about the *reasons* why certain photos are so special to them (and their explanations regarding *how* they know this to be true!).

I hope readers are now interested in learning more about the reasons *why* people choose to take the photos they take, *why* they expect others will have certain reactions to them (including those taken for marketing or artistic purposes), *why* they get certain meanings from photos even when these might not match what the photographer in-

tended them to see there, *why* they keep some but not others (or prefer certain ones while disliking others) – and *why* certain photos produce such strong (and often unexpected) emotional responses from deep inside people's hearts and memories – responses that viewers themselves frequently were often previously unaware of.

Regardless of what these answers might be, one thing has become very clear to me as a clinical psychologist and art therapist who has used photographs for several decades as tools for helping people (or for showing them how to help themselves). Photographs provide an excellent and elegant solution for examining and exploring feelings with the least cognitive interference!

Whether working with people's own photos or responding to those taken by others, all photographs are actually deep metaphors in symbolic visual form – in addition to documenting what was in front of the camera when its shutter was pressed.

In photographs, time literally stops and external spatial

reality in some ways ceases to exist. Each snapshot is simultaneously a moment removed from all moments and yet still part of them all. Observer and observed become part of the same thread of life, which is itself unobservable, yet we attempt to stop it all with the click of a shutter. This is what PhotoTherapy is all about: when a person interacts with the snapshot, even just by looking at it or pressing the shutter to create it spontaneously, he or she "changes the picture" altogether.

An ordinary snapshot gives form and structure to our deepest emotional states and unconscious communications. It serves as a bridge between the cognitive and the sensory, between the inner self lying below conscious awareness and the self able to be known to us – and between the self we are aware of inside and that self we are seen as by others.

It can also connect the past with the present, forming a multilevel interlocking matrix and preparing us to continue this path onward to time beyond the present mo-

ment. It joins the physical world to the psychic one – and the reality we are aware of, to that which only presents itself after the fact in connections or patterns visible only in retrospect.

PhotoTherapy techniques can be used to help bring information that people have forgotten, buried or defended themselves against into the realm of the knowable and recognizable, especially the information they hold without words (and cannot tell completely in words). They can reconnect people with details of their lives that were originally recorded as sensory impressions and with remembered information whose relevance may not be recognized until a visual stimulus helps make the association become conscious.

Literacy is primarily visual, and visual literacy is so primary that photos become the logical language for communication in therapeutic dialogue. Whatever the metaphor, people's ordinary snapshots have strikingly important lives (and secrets). They permit people to explore this

predominantly nonverbal terrain in a predominantly nonverbal manner. Thus they can be effective keys that unlock doors to previously hidden information, feelings and memories that words alone simply cannot reach.

Thus they permit connection of the verbal with the visual, and both of these with the emotional – and in explaining these connections, people can begin to "bear witness" to their own life story and its importance. Using PhotoTherapy techniques, clients (and their therapists) can get a better "picture" of their life that is worth *far* more than the proverbial thousand words.

*Some portions of this Article have been previously published in this author's 1993/1999 classic text, *PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums* – as well as on her website ("PhotoTherapy Techniques in Counseling and Therapy"), in her 2001 invited article in "AfterImage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criti-

cism", and her 2009 invited "Commentary" article in the "European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counseling".

NOTES

¹ David Krauss, personal communication, November 12, 1998.

² "*PhotoTherapy*" can be spelled or capitalized in a number of ways. This particular way (two capital letters in one word) indicates the preferred this Article's author has always used since she first started this work (in 1973) in all her therapy, teaching, writing practice, and consulting – because it communicates her strong belief that the double-capitalization signals the "equal importance" of the two parts of that word (the marriage of which is far more important than one or the other alone).

³ More specific definitions of these terms are provided later in this article.

⁴ For a brief comparison of the similarities and differences between PhotoTherapy and Art Therapy, see the webpage titled "Compared With Other Fields" page of this author's website -- and for a more comprehensive and very detailed comparison, see the Section of that same title, in this author's 1993/1999 book (referenced in a previous footnote).

⁵ For a brief comparison of the similarities and differences between PhotoTherapy and Therapeutic Photography, see the webpage titled "Compared With Other Fields" page of this author's website – and for a more comprehensive and very detailed comparison, see the Section of that same title, in this author's 1993/1999 book (referenced in a previous footnote).

⁶ For additional information about the techniques of PhotoTherapy (including theoretical foundation, case illustrations and anecdotes, practical exercises with which therapists can begin, as well as a lengthy reading list), see this author's book, as well as her 2001, 2004, and 2009 publications listed at the end of this article.

⁷ For updates about educational lectures or training opportunities to learn more about PhotoTherapy techniques, see the "Upcoming Events" Section of this author's website's page "Training and Education"

⁸ Numerous examples of such technique combinations used in actual practice can be found throughout all the Author's publications listed at the end of this Chapter.

⁹ For more about these experiences see author's biography.

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Pages of *PhotoTherapy Techniques in Counseling Website* that were specifically referenced in this Chapter:

–<http://www.phototherapy-centre.com> (home page)

–http://www.phototherapycentre.com/five_techniques.htm
(the five techniques of PhotoTherapy page)

–<http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/comparisons.htm-Comp1>
(comparisons of PhotoTherapy with Art Therapy page);

–<http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/comparisons.htm#Comp2>
(comparisons of PhotoTherapy with Therapeutic Photography page);

–<http://www.phototherapycentre.com/training.htm> (training and education page);

–<http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/training.htm#work> (upcoming Weiser workshops/Events page)

–<http://www.phototherapycentre.com/bookvid.htm> (Judy Weiser book and DVD page)

–http://www.phototherapycentre.com/recommended_readings.htm (recommended readings page)

–<http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/widww.htm> (“Who is Doing What, Where” page)

–<http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/biography.htm>(Judy Weiser biography & publications page)

–<http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/contact.htm> (contact information for the PhotoTherapy Centre)

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