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Clients' Family Albums and Other Photo-Biographical Collections

Photos Narrating Clients' Personal History

Family and other photo-biographical photographs — whether formally kept in albums or more loosely gathered into collections on walls, social media, online albums, or fridge doors — have much more value as a whole than just the one-by-one viewing of their individual pictures.

Family albums and similar collections document a person's life within the context of the family unit it is part of, regardless of whether that family is defined by birth, adoption, or choice. Albums offer proof of existence over time and usually many generations, documenting permanence and change, continuity, roots, traditions, values, patterns that continue to repeat unknowingly, and degrees of freedom for the individual within it all.

They mark those special moments, places, people, and even pets or other possessions which have mattered most to the life of the family it represents — or, rather, to the life of that family as defined by the person who created that album their own unique way. Its pages present not only individuals by themselves, but also within numerous larger interlocking contexts showing who they are collectively (within that family's relationship-matrix) even when seemingly alone.

Sharing stories triggered by album-memories allows younger family members to learn where they came from culturally and historically, as well as literally. It also permits older ones to reconnect with past memories and familial introjections that both define the family and signal its future path.

A person's family album is not just a collection of what has mattered to them, but also provides tangible proof that there are other people to whom *they* have mattered, also. The pages also incidentally point out the album-maker's natural support group, people who love them even when they might not be liking them very much at that particular point in time — because photos of untrusted or undependable relationships are rarely desired for permanent keeping. Albums are usually visual narratives 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.

Photo-albums have been described as the "attic of people's hearts", and their family photos are often the thing mentioned as most missed by those who have lost their possessions to fire or other disasters. Even though family albums are not artifacts of objectivity, and the story constructed inside their pages will always be a selectively-told one, they are nevertheless commonly viewed as true recordings of a family's collective identity, as well as talismans holding and protecting it from future harm inflicted by fading memories.

In many ways, a family's album is their metaphoric home — and their foundation for identity as well.

How This Technique Works

Although photo albums and other similar collections of family history are comprised of single photos made *by* people, and *of* people by others — and even at times include self-portraits — when these are put into an orderly sequence that collectively forms a "bigger picture" such as an album, they all take on a secondary life whose scope reaches far beyond that of any particular single kind of photograph covered by any of the other four basic 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 as its own particular kind, using any of the other techniques to work with it individually.

Looking through family photos — and sharing stories about what they show — happens often when people get together socially, and this natural usually-enjoyable behaviour can also be spontaneously therapeutic on its own. Therefore, when asked to do much the same within the more formal context of a therapy session, clients usually find that this kind of album-based therapeutic inquiry feels more comfortable and familiar than being asked verbal directly-intrusive questions by the therapist. But telling the "family history" through photographic illustrations, while the listener just happens to be the therapist, is usually a much more reassuringly "normal" process.

The generalized, idealized version of the family history presented in the family album is rarely the same as the individual personal memories collectively kept inside each client's own mind — yet they usually have no idea of how selectively-created those memories are — and how different from another family member's. Therefore, clients will presume that the "reality" of their family photo album (constructed from their own viewpoint) is nevertheless the same identical story that will be seen there by other family members viewing the same photos. And yet this is a false assumption — and can be a telling metaphor for why there might be disagreements about other aspects of the family, cause by similar incorrect assumptions of who and how those others should be and act.

Therefore, it can be extremely useful to ask each client (or family members sharing the same therapy session) to go back and re-imagine (and if possible, literally visually reconstruct by use of duplications of those photographs) their shared family album from inside their own selective viewpoint — and to "re-member" (reconstruct with altered or replacement photographs) that story according to their own (and often very different) version of what took place over all those years.

This can provide additional perspectives as one begins to understand the larger role of the entire three-to-four-generational family system that is the "living entity" that keeps all the components of that family in balance on its life-path — and how therapists trained in using Family Systems Theory-based therapy techniques can build interventions involving photographs to deepen their systemic understandings of the client's family relationships and communication patterns (including nonverbal ones). Reviewing family photos with clients can bring to life numerous relationship patterns (such as cut-off's, triangulation or differentiation-fusion issues, etc. — and behaviours and assumptions related to them), as well as intergenerational transmission patterns, introjections, double-bind relationships, and so forth.

Helping people see themselves inside their own personal history contexts often helps them better understand their current situations and feelings — and perhaps recognize where some of their expectations and judgments are coming from. Therefore, asking questions based on the photographic contents of clients' albums can shed light on their entire personal map of reality and the relationships that populate it, since the photos represent nonverbal emotional maps of the actual spontaneous family dynamics themselves, captured "live, in action".

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

Entire multi-generational family systems are waiting inside albums to be recognized for the useful visual clues they provide, such as evidence of power alignments and unfinished business or family scripts and sub-texts that were frozen in a snap-second of someone's life. Family network maps lie embedded there for those who know how to recognize their photographically-distilled forms. Photo-illustrated personal narratives and personally-symbolic messages await therapists trained to note these extra layers of clients' lives (and minds).

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 this person lived, and their life had value. In this way, using such photos to assist the process of life review and reminiscence can help people refocus their perspective off the immediate moment of crisis and instead observe the rhythms and usual positivity of the larger natural flow of life. Albums allow people to review their experiences and accomplishments, their connections and relationships with others, and to find meaning in their life.

Thus, while therapeutically processing what appears in each individual image inside clients' collections of photo-biographical pictures, the investigative questions used by therapists to activate this technique can also be based on the overall contents of the album as a "living system" itself, rather than solely on contents of single photographs alone. Questions to use when working with individual photos are included in the examples given with the first three PhotoTherapy techniques; however, additional Assignments are included below, to demonstrate how to ask questions (from a systemic perspective) about the entire photo-narrative as a whole (the relationship of images given extra meaning by being placed in relationship on one page (or Browser folder/window), how the pages are sequentially ordered (chronologically or otherwise), who has the right to change any of this, and so forth).

In addition to the Assignments below, family photos can also be probed for their embedded emotional messages (such as the degree of touching or hugging displayed), visible nonverbal family scripts or prohibitions, expectations about personal appearance or gender-roles, messages about unresolved issues, irregularities in the natural rhythm event-recording (which might indicate trouble-spots during otherwise-normal flow of time) or people who suddenly "go missing" from its pages — along with many other questions that can help therapist and client explore deeper meanings suggested by facial expressions, body language, and other related visual clues expressing that family's non-verbalized emotional map.

As with the other four PhotoTherapy techniques, *Clients' Family Albums and other Photo-Biographical Collections* can be worked with either on their own or in combination with other kinds of client photographs, as well as in combination with expressive arts media and other appropriated imagery for additional therapeutic enhancement.

Examples of Assignments

Clients might be asked to look through all their album photos and explore:

“The implications of what is evident (or not) about their own family and its history”

“What is secret or rarely discussed”

“Which photos surprise them the most by being there”

“Which are most or least ‘true’”

“Which ones they would change or remove if they could (or add as new pictures to help tell the family story better or more correctly)”

“How they can tell which snapshot was taken by whom”

“Why they think certain family members are habitually photographed next to (or avoiding) certain other people”

“Who is usually the center of attention (or taking most of the photographs) and why”

Important:

These sample questions above are provided only to illustrate the kinds that trained therapists might ask clients when using this technique during their therapy session.

You are welcome to try them out for yourself using your own personal photos, but **unless you are professionally trained in conducting therapy, please do not try to use them with other people, as the results could be harmful.**

Two Brief Examples of this Technique Being Used

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- 1) One man's experience in examining dozens of childhood pictures from his family's albums demonstrated how such double binds and mixed messages can also frequently be communicated and documented photographically.

Most of the photos in his family's album were of him alone. He had been born five years after his sister died at birth; his parents' viewed him as their "only" child and he was raised as a precious treasure representing everything a child could (and *should*) be.

"I became their daughter as well as their son, which complicated the messages and expectations I kept getting," he said, "You can see this in the way that I was always posed year after year as being literally the object of their attention."

He explained that for his first eighteen years, his mother had a very formal photograph taken of him every year on his birthday — and so this regular documentation of him showed not only his personal history, but as his many outfits changed from sailor suit to cowboy to more "proper" suits of various styles, the images also began to retrospectively serve as a socio-cultural visual history of his life.

He remarked that one particular image stood out as being especially significant for him. It was of him with his mother, both of them smiling, but she was tightly forcing his hands under, which he commented must have been very uncomfortable for him:

He said the photo is symbolic of how he was treated and was expected to respond to such expectations emotionally, and he said that it illustrates how his mother often subtly tried to block his becoming independent both physically as in the picture as well as emotionally.

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Excerpted from *PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*



"My parents had seemed to love me and give me everything, so why was I so angry? Look at this photo! My mother's love was very controlling and ultimately a very crippling love. I see this in the way she is bending my hands as I sat on her lap.

I was smiling and she was smiling, but I was being controlled and she was really doing this so we would make a good impression on others. She was invading and manipulating my self and space. I had... displaced anger toward her for these kinds of actions and indirectly blamed my father for not stopping her manipulation."

It is important to remember that in all client therapy situations, it is their own definition of a photograph's meaning that is worked with during sessions. Regardless of whether the therapist saw the story of this photo the same way that the client did, is not relevant to working with him to alleviate the pain in his memory.

His description of his Mother's reasons for holding his hands a certain way, may or may not be her own reasons (and in fact, she might be very surprised to hear his version). The therapist might not see this photo the same way as the client. These things may be shared at whatever time the therapist thinks that perhaps "another way of looking at this photo" might be useful — but this does not make the therapist's version (nor the Mother's) any more "true" than the clients. For more about how to work with people's different perceptions of the same photograph, click here to read about the fifth major technique ("[Clients' Photo-Projective Interactions](#)")

2) "This is my photo of my late sister, who died in 1992 at the age of 43. I am on the right); she is holding my hand:

"It helps me find answers to the question of my persisting identity. It is in my nature, or soul, to see the world through eyes of innocence, openness and amazement, despite a great variance in what I bear witness to and experience.

"I have never lost my childhood sense of wonderment, even though I am retired now. It is spiritual for me, this picture -- and through it, my spirit connects me in life with her and also my other sister, both of whom died young, and my spirit keeps me alive to the thriving, existing world around me. It was good for me to learn this again".

