



PhotoTherapy Centre

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Clients' Photo-Projective Interactions

What is the story behind each of the photographs below? • Why do you think it was taken? • What would you title it? • What thoughts, feelings, or memories come to mind when you see it? • What might its voice say or ask if it could speak? • What message, secret, or information might it hold? • What does each remind you of in your own life?*



*To have your own responses to these questions added at the end of this pdf, **send them to the PhotoTherapy Centre** for consideration — *and please be sure to include the number of the photo you are commenting about.* Approved responses will be added below.

The Interface Between People and Photos

Much like viewing the world through sunglasses whose tinting effects are so familiar that they are no longer noticed 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 — although they remain unaware of this happening!

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What a person notices around them (or in photographs) is always viewed from within the "filtered" memories of everything else that has happened to them up to that moment of time. Thus, if therapists can find out more about the reasons why their clients take or respond to a photograph in a certain way, this will provide very useful information about their deeper unconscious values and related expectations.

Viewing a photograph also usually results in some sort of emotional reaction, even if only that the picture appears uninteresting or confusing. People look at a photograph (someone else's representation of something important) and take their own meaning from it — which is often a different message than the photographer intended! Therefore, while viewers try to figure out what a photo is about, they are actually constructing its personal meaning for themselves while they are interacting with it.

The unconscious map people use to make sense of things — whether the world in general or only inside their own minds — is formed by a combination of their own personal, familial, cultural, and societal backgrounds, as well as everything they have thought, felt, and experienced up until that moment in time when they are encountering something (or even a photograph of something).

And since these things frame all the filters they perceive and define the world through, their own personal inner experience an experience (or a photograph) is actually the only version of it that they will ever be able to know or remember— unless skewed by the imposition of an outside perspective.

The consequence of this is very truly "What you see is what you get" — if people don't notice something (even if others do), it is simply not there for them — or, it's there, but not important enough to have enough meaning worth paying attention to.

But viewers rarely realize that the story "found" in a certain photograph is actually selectively-projected *by* them while they are looking at it, discussing it, or otherwise interacting with it as a stimulus-object. The meaning of the photograph that they perceive coming from that image is actually created through becoming consciously aware of their own unique interpretation of what its visual surface details mean in terms of their own inner map of reality.

And they are often equally surprised to learn that others will always see this same photo differently, not realizing that its truth is always only relative to whoever is looking. People always project meaning onto a photograph — because there is no other way to encounter one — as they perceive it, they actually bring into being the meaning and story that they later believe is there, on its surface, when they first saw it!

And this is true not just for random general media photos like internet images, magazine pictures, postcards, advertisements, and so forth — but also for those informal snapshots that record and narrate people's own ordinary daily lives. Even familiar personal photos will never be interpreted exactly the same way by different viewers, even those who appear in these photos themselves or the person who took it originally.

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Projective-Interactive PhotoTherapy techniques are an ideal way for clients to safely encounter their own personal, societal, familial, class, racial, gender, cultural, and other filters without having their unique perceptions devalued, demeaned, disempowered or judged by others whose own filters are different. In therapy sessions, where clarity of communication is particularly important, it can be very helpful for clients to realize that their own particular way of interpreting the world, or the actions of others, is not the only way possible — which often is not just a surprise, but also a turning-point for their realization about this being a possible reason for feeling misunderstood.

Once people can accept that everyone sees any photograph quite differently, yet each correctly for themselves, they can then hopefully begin to understand that this process of selective perception also happens in all their interactions with other people everyday. Hopefully they can then also begin to realize how many of the actions, feelings, and intentions that they blame on others are instead arising from their own personal constructs and projections, rather than on some externally-objective reality that exists outside of themselves.

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

How This Technique Works

Because the photo-projective interactive process is located more in the abstract space *between* any photo and its viewer, rather than in the visual details on its surface, it affects how people perceive any kind of photos (photos of them, by them about them — individual photos or in family collections — it is actually at the heart of any kind of work involving PhotoTherapy Techniques.

People project meaning when they look at photos others have taken — whether new topics or places or people they have seen before, photos taken of them or even the ones they have taken but suddenly see new additional contents that "weren't there before", or even advertising or news photographs. Therefore the projective process happens any time an image is viewed — and therefore it lies at the heart of all the other PhotoTherapy techniques as well: people selectively project unique meanings onto their own family photos, photos of or by them, and even their own self-portraits that they view differently each time they see them.

Therefore, although this technique is actually is an integral part of all the others (as explains the very reasons that they succeed, it must be separated from the others in order to

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teach it independently, and if possible, taught first as it forms the underlying foundation for the rationale of the other four.

In projective PhotoTherapy work, clients are encouraged to become more consciously aware of the phenomenological process that is happening: that they are themselves actively and uniquely deconstructing (and reconstructing) the meaning of any photograph while they try to figure it out what it is about emotionally, as well as what it is of, visually.

For example, a photo might remind them of something, someone, or some place in their own life; it might trigger memories or feelings in association with the visual stimulus; it might result in the discovery of additional information or unanswered questions that get pulled to conscious awareness by being unexpectedly brought to mind.

This will happen whether clients are viewing their own snapshots and albums, or those taken by other people (including photos that their therapist has on view). The point is that, therapeutically, any photograph can be worked with as a beginning rather than a finished product, and as a stimulus or catalyst for encouraging clients' projections of meaning and emotional valence upon it as a means of uncovering what is deep inside them.

Since there can be no wrong way to look at, or respond to, any photo image, there can be no wrong answers to be judged on. *Right and wrong become purely relative terms as photo-responses are accepted for their content rather than their correctness.* Therapists pay attention not only to clients' actual photo-responses but also to the underlying reasons *why* these answers arise. Since every interpretation is correct for the person 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 or self-doubted.

What clients answer to the right kind of photo-based questions asked by their therapist (*such as the examples of assignments below*) can certainly contribute to a better understanding of how they think and feel — but their answers become even more therapeutically useful when they begin to reflect upon *how* they knew these were the right answers — the "why" of their answer revealing more about them, than the "what" they first replied with.

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 evoke 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 purpose of photo-projective work.

As with the other four PhotoTherapy techniques, *Clients' Photo-Projective Interactions* 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.

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Examples of Assignments

The client could be asked to select a photo and, after studying it for a while, engage in dialogue with it, answering things such as:

"What is the story of this photograph?"

"How did it come to be taken?"

"What thoughts, feelings, or memories come to mind as you look at it?"

"Why do you think the photographer took it, and were they satisfied with the result?"

"What might you title this photo?"

"If it could speak, what might it say or ask?"

"What messages or secrets might it hold?"

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 counselling, please do not try to use them with other people, as the results could be harmful.**

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An Example of this Technique Being Used

"A particular photograph (on the table in my therapist's office where dozens of pictures were kept for viewing) "called" to me and so I picked it up to look at. It is a photo of someone looking out of a broken window. In the reflection of the window is trees. The walls that the window is attached to are steel with rivets in them.

My reflections: Is it a train? A building? A prison?

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

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"It made me in some ways think of the men I worked with in the prison environment. They were far away from home and even though there were trees around them (it was an Indigenous (Native/Aboriginal) justice model used in this prison setting, using traditional healing environments and methods), they were nonetheless in prison.

"Those are aside thoughts. I knew that I chose the photo because it said something about me and not about someone else. I just wasn't sure what it said. I had to sit with it for quite a while to try to understand what it meant.

"The face in the window looked tired, and that was how I feel. I have been in school for ten years now, and I am just tired. Tired of the constant struggle for money, time, and sanity. Tired of having to constantly fight for what I believe in. And... well... just tired. I have not had any sort of vacation in 7 years.

"Why the broken window? And where is the person? I felt the person was on a train that was like a prison. They are going somewhere but they can't get off the train until it stops (like my school experience). The only connection they have to the outside world is through the broken window (my occasional glimpses at life... walking in the park, going for coffee with friends, visiting people).

"The person is not miserable. Just tired. They know that they have to stay on the train and they won't get off until they get to the end of the ride, which may be years and years away. That's how I feel.

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"I had no plans of staying in school this long. I'm not an academic at heart. I wanted to get an art degree, get more skills and maybe write children's books. Here I am ten years later sitting on the same train.

"I have almost forgotten what it is like to live in a world that is not full of so many isolating feelings and tasks like writing (the academic kind, not the creative kind), marks (grades totally perplex and freeze me), the coldness of certain professors (if people keep you at a distance they can keep the hierarchy in place), and the lack of extended periods of being in a relaxing and natural setting to just let my thoughts go.

"As I look back on the image, I could say that I feel somewhat suffocated and constrained. I can see the trees, but I can't touch them. I can see outside of this train-prison, but I can't get off until the ride is over.

"I could get off if I wanted to, but then I wouldn't be where I need to be. I need to get off in the right place, so I have to suffer this isolating ride. I found this quite enlightening and sad at the same time. Because after all, the train ride goes on for some time still."

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