

PhotoTherapy Techniques -- Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums¹

by

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PhotoTherapy Techniques use clients' own personal snapshots and family photos -- and the feelings, memories, thoughts and information these evoke -- as catalysts for therapeutic communication.

The Secret Lives of Personal Snapshots and Family Photographs

Every snapshot a person takes or keeps is also a type of self-portrait, acting like a "mirror with memory" reflecting back those moments, people and places that were special enough to be frozen in time forever. Collectively, these photos make visible the ongoing stories of that person's life, serving as visual footprints marking where they have been (emotionally, as well as physically) and also perhaps signaling where they might next be heading. Even their reactions to postcards, magazine pictures, and snapshots taken by others can provide illuminating clues to their own inner life and its stories.

However, the actual meaning of any photograph lies less in its visual facts and more

¹ Article and photos are ©Copyright, 2010 Judy Weiser. Note: Portions of this article have appeared previously in: the first two publications by Weiser listed at the end of this article, the *Child & Family Journal* (2002), as well as on the PhotoTherapy Centre's informational website at: <http://www.phototherapy-centre.com> and in the author's book "PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums". For full citation details of all mentioned here,

in what these details evoke inside the mind (and heart) of each viewer. While looking at a snapshot, people actually spontaneously create the meaning that they think is coming from that photo itself, and this may or may not be the meaning that the photographer originally intended to convey.

Thus, its meaning (and emotional "message") is dependent upon who is doing the looking, because people's perceptions and unique life experiences will always automatically frame, and actually define what they see as being real. Therefore, people's reactions to photographs that they feel are special can actually reveal a lot about themselves, if only the right kinds of questions are asked.

PhotoTherapy is an interactive system of counselling techniques that makes use of clients' interactions with their own personal snapshots and family albums, as well as photos taken by others and those created by them during therapy sessions, to help them connect with feelings and memories too deep or complex to be reached, understood, or expressed through words alone. Because people usually find that sharing and talking about photos is a familiar and comfortable experience, therapists usually find these techniques to be very "user-friendly" in helping make a connection with clients who might be initially resistant to participating in counselling. PhotoTherapy techniques are a way to bring to light nonverbally stored information -- that was sensory-encoded in its original input, and is later sensorially-accessed into conscious awareness (i.e., feelings), and doing so by using a primarily visual "channel" that will usually evoke discoveries that are worth far more than the proverbial thousand words!

How Therapists Can Use Photos to Help Clients Heal

People's personal snapshots permanently record important daily moments in their life (and the associated emotions unconsciously embedded within these). Because of this, photos can serve as natural bridges for accessing, exploring, and communicating about feelings and memories (including deeply-buried or long-forgotten ones), along with any psychotherapeutic issues these bring to light.

Clients' photos are tangible symbolic self-constructs and metaphoric transitional objects, silently offering them inner "in-sight" about things less consciously evident or verbally accessible. Under the guidance of a therapist trained in PhotoTherapy techniques, clients explore what their own personally meaningful snapshots and family albums are about emotionally, in addition to what they show visually. Such information is latent in all 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.

When PhotoTherapy techniques are used in counselling sessions, photographs are not just passively reflected upon in silent contemplation, but also actively created, posed for, talked with, listened to, reconstructed, revised to form or illustrate new narratives, collected on assignment, re-visualized in memory or imagination, integrated into art therapy expressions, or even set into animated dialogue with other photos. This allows clients to connect with parts of themselves in ways that words alone cannot as fully represent or deconstruct.

The Techniques of PhotoTherapy

As clients discuss the layers of meanings contained within their photographs, they also reveal a lot about themselves: their inner value system, beliefs, attitudes and expectations that inseparably accompany their words. These nonverbal codes hold important clues about how people make sense of their world (and their place within it), and are the place where initiative for therapeutic change has to start). Since clients' personal photographic images always are operating at two levels simultaneously (concretely and symbolically), this makes them uniquely effective therapeutic tools precisely 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 feelings) that 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 which the client may or may not be aware of.

Each therapist using PhotoTherapy techniques will use them a bit differently, depending upon that person's own professional training and preferred theoretical orientation, as well as each client's unique 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.

Making the photos, or bringing them along to the therapy session, is just the start -- 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 so forth). Therefore, what for photographers is usually the end-point (a finished photo) is, for PhotoTherapy purposes, just the beginning...

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 (or a camera). Memories, feelings and thoughts that emerge during the photographic dialogue are often more therapeutically relevant than the image-reactions themselves!

The therapist's primary role is to encourage and support clients' own personal discoveries while exploring and interacting with the ordinary personal and family snapshots they view, make, collect, remember, or even only imagine. Using PhotoTherapy techniques requires no special skill or training in photography itself, no prior contact with cameras, neither for the therapist nor the client -- as long as that individual is able to view (or at least remember or imagine) a photograph. Although the

art of photography can be appreciated for itself while doing PhotoTherapy, it is more "photography-as-a-verb" (as an activator of therapeutic process and agent of change) that proves to be so therapeutically beneficial during this process.

Each of the five major PhotoTherapy techniques is based on one or more of the five kinds of photographs listed below (although in practice these categories often naturally overlap). Like the fingers of a hand, the five PhotoTherapy techniques are interdependent and work best when synergistically combined. And like all interrelated systems it is rather difficult to teach the component parts one-by-one in linear progression, yet they must be temporarily parted in order to explain how each works (and why). The descriptions below can only provide a brief overview, 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:

1) Photos which 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 gathering "found" photos from magazines, postcards, Internet images, digital manipulation, and so forth);

2) Photos which have been taken of the client by other people (whether posed on purpose or captured spontaneously unaware);

3) Self-portraits, which are any kind of photos that clients have made of themselves, either literally or metaphorically (but in all cases, these are photos of clients where they themselves had full control and power over all aspects of the image's creation);

4) Family album and other photo-biographical collections (whether of birth family or family of choice, and whether formally kept in albums or more "loosely" combined

into narratives by placement on walls or refrigerator doors, inside wallets or desktop frames, into computer screens or family websites, and so forth); where the group of photos as a whole has a value far greater than just the linear sum of the individual images being examined individually, and;

5) "Photo-Projectives", which make use of the (phenomenological) fact that the meaning of any photo is primarily created by its viewer during their process of perceiving it -- and thus any photograph that draws interest from client or therapist has potential use in the counseling setting. Because this final technique underlies all the others, it warrants a bit more discussion:

Looking at any kind of photographic image produces perceptions and reactions that are projected from the viewer's own inner map of reality which determines how they make sense of what they see. Because discovering "objective truth" of any image is therefore an impossibility, no two viewers will ever get identical meaning from the same photograph. This PhotoTherapy technique has been named "Photo-Projectives", because people always project meaning onto a photograph; there is simply no other way to see one. Therefore, this technique is located not in any particular kind of photograph, but rather in the less-tangible interface between a photo and its viewer (or maker), the "place" where each person forms their own unique responses to what they see.

Since the meaning of any snapshot depends more on its emotional contents than its visual ones, 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 purpose of photo-projective work. And, in therapeutic

sessions, where clarity of communication is particularly important, using this technique can be a good way to help clients realize that their own way of interpreting the world, or the actions or intentions of others, is not the only way possible.

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 help to consider it from another perspective. In order to help clients make desired changes (particularly those from minority or non-mainstream culture, disenfranchised class, race or gender, or other different "realities"), therapists must first be able to see the world through that client's own eyes. This will enable the therapist to discover the unique personal, family, cultural, and other unconscious filters that selectively determine meanings unique to the client, even though such meanings may not always be evident to, or even understood by, the therapist.

Like so many other holistic approaches, each component technique of PhotoTherapy practice is partially formed by, and overlaps, the others. Therefore, the most effective application of these techniques will occur when they are creatively combined --because they comprise an integrally interconnected system that is difficult to use just part of.

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. Thus any single image has potential as a catalyst and stimulus for valuable counseling process, even though such results cannot be predictably known ahead of time.

Therapists only help people to re-discover what they already know unconsciously, and notice how their visual/nonverbal communications can reveal pre-existing details or patterns of their lives which were already there, but not previously available to their own conscious recall. Helping clients attain this awareness, and learn how to incorporate its teachings in a way that improves their life, will hopefully result in clients who won't need to turn to a therapist the next time a problem arises.

Some Examples

There is never any way to predict in advance exactly what responses clients will have to their own snapshots, or even to photographs which appear on the walls, tables, and bookshelves of my counselling office. Some of these I have taken myself; others are postcards or greeting cards, and sometimes they are just an image that caught my eye on a calendar or magazine page so I cut it out to put where I could gaze at it. Though I initially put these up for lighthearted decorative reasons, I am no longer surprised when a client has a strong emotional response to viewing any of these which is usually far different from my own perception of that image.

• Example 1:

One day at the local zoo, I photographed a scene that I wanted to save, because it symbolized to me childhood's playful imagination and make-believe that I as an adult too rarely encounter now...



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When first adding it to my wall-of-photos-to-look-at in my office waiting area, I expected responses reflecting this joyful mood (and did indeed hear several comments about it, such as: "Oh, the innocence of childhood fun"; "They're in 'never-never land' with Peter Pan, or with some pirate ship exploring some desert island somewhere"; and "They're off on some adventure a million miles away; time is standing still, and they have absolutely no awareness that there's anyone else around!")

When one almost-teenager paused to look at this image, I asked him for his response. "It's like they've adopted that elf right into their family like a brother," he smiled. "What would you do if that elf came alive," I innocently asked back. "Well, I'd take him away from there, and treat him to lunch at MacDonald's; I'd feed him green food and ask him if he knew that guy E.T. in the movies, and then I'd take him home to show my Mom." Easy answers so far, I thought, and so I continued, "What would your Mom think of all this? What would she and the elf say to each other? What would happen next?"

His answers, though given matter-of-factly quickly resulted in my becoming a much more attentive listener. As if stating the obvious, he continued, "Mom would think it was great, but then she and me would have to find a big enough hiding place for him

before Dad got home, cause there might be trouble." "Why?" I gently queried. "Because if Dad was drunk like he usually is, and saw this elf thing in his way, he'd kick him and beat him up. Better if I hid him under the bed with me and my little brother till I can tell for sure if we're gonna get hit or not."

Needless to say, a lengthy counselling session ensued with this family as it began to deal with first, admitting there were some previously-denied problems and abusive situations not being discussed in earlier counselling sessions, and secondly, beginning to do something about it all.

If painful and abusive situations are happening in a home, these are often well-guarded by the family system. Children are often cautioned not to tell anyone what goes on at home, but if not dealt with therapeutically, such memories of distorted truth (and the confused feelings associated with them) can long lie inaccessibly dormant, surfacing only when the unconscious is suddenly triggered in a way that bypasses the usual cognitive defenses and protections.

Such memories and feelings that are not consciously stored or easily verbally accessible often remain out of conscious awareness altogether, surfacing only when a sensory stimulus like a smell or a visual input brings them forth spontaneously and intuitively, without the usual defensive safeguards and verbal rationalizations that so often cloak their deep pain and power.

To release such material for working with, one must bypass those usual verbal channels, and 'sneak' inside somewhat 'sideways' to touch feelings before the conscious mind can cover or deny them with words. For example, it is often much safer to talk about the people in photographs, (even if one is in those images oneself), than about

oneself directly, where such information may prove too threatening to encounter. As the above example so well illustrates, using photos as projective catalysts can provide a useful bridging process: touching below awareness, yet remaining manageable because of photographs' ability to help clients tangibly partialize, ensure safe distancing, and work metaphorically through visual symbol.

• **Example 2:**

I took this photograph while waiting for a Thanksgiving parade to begin passing by; I included it in a large collage of photos hung on the wall of the entry hall at the PhotoTherapy Centre.



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Over many years, various clients have responded to it with comments such as: "He's scared; he's been bad, and they're making him sit there till his parents come to get him and then he's going to be punished", and "She's a run-away and just got caught stealing a sandwich, and they're gonna take her to jail and beat her up!"

Comments such as these two can be further probed to find out how the client imagines that the child got into the situation in the first place; what they think will happen next to the child in the photo ("what will the next photo in this story show?"); what the child might be thinking, feeling, hoping, expecting, and so forth; what they might tell or

ask that child if they could; what they think this child would say or do if able to speak or move; and other such open-ended questions (all tailored, of course to the therapeutic goals of that counselling session).

In clients' answers to such questions I hear their responses not only for the content about the subject in the photo itself, but also about what they themselves would likely do in similar circumstances. Therefore, if the therapy relationship is ready for deeper probing, I could also ask more direct questions, such as: "Could this photo have been of you at some point in your life?", "If that was you in that picture, what would you be feeling or thinking?", "How did you get into that situation in the photo and what would you do next?" -- thus probing the client's own life more directly, while still at a safer 'arms-length' distance.

For example, one nine-year-old girl responded to this photo by saying the little girl was lonely, and she was worried, because her Daddy had gone off and left her, and she was afraid he wasn't ever coming back to find her. This interpretation bears greater import when understanding that this child was in therapy trying to resolve her feelings about her parents' recent separation as well as her father's subsequent lengthy hospitalization.

Her answers to my questions about how the child in the photo would handle things (for example, "What would that child say if she could speak?" or "If her Daddy could hear her and know how she was feeling, what do you think she'd want to tell him?"), conveyed to me how she herself was attempting to make sense of all the confusion in her own life and how she was coping with this disruption.

Further probing her expectations and feelings, I asked, "If you had a magic wand,

and could make everything 'right' again for this little girl, what would you do? How would that photo look?". Not surprisingly, she replied to this last question by saying, "I'd have the whole family together in the other photo, everybody all there, all of them hugging her, so she'd know it was all OK again!".

And so my next step was to have her activate this notion of a new "Family Portrait" by having her use photocopies of various individual photos of her Mom and Dad, and other family members, to create a collage of them "all together at once", as a metaphor for showing her there are indeed ways that blended/separated families can still form positive and lasting relationships.

• **Example 3:**

One man's experience in examining dozens of childhood pictures from his family album demonstrated how double binds and mixed messages are frequently 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; he was his parents' "only" child and was raised as a precious treasure representing everything a child could be to them.

He said that one particular image stood out as being especially significant to him:



©1987, copyright R.S.

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

He explained, "My parents had seemed to love me and give me everything, so why was I so angry at them? This photograph gave me a clue... My mother's love was a very controlling and ultimately 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. This insight helped me immensely, as I got in touch with, and eventually put to rest, the displaced anger I had felt toward her for this action (and indirectly to my father for not stopping her manipulation). This all was catalyzed as I looked more closely at pictures of my childhood for clues to my condition."

• **Example 4:** *(no photo with this one)*

In their ability to 'freeze' action, photos can be used to still the ever-flowing dynamics of the living family system and allow these details to be scrutinized. Not only does one learn of the past, and changes over time and place and persons, but in re-experiencing the photos while looking at them, current feelings and behaviors can be better understood and appreciated, as well as the ability to re-connect clients with previously blocked and buried material. Memories are sometimes 'dressed up' —

remembered differently than they 'really' happened. Looking back at photos from those times can do a lot to help correct psychologically limiting distortions or misrepresentations and to clarify hazy details. They are an undeniable record of the past and of change, that no amount of verbal filtering could completely cover up, as the following example demonstrates:

Two years from finishing High School, and terribly bored with it all, Alan wanted to drop out — but he had a sensible-sounding plan (though it needed his parents' approval). He had already secretly been accepted for the local ship-building apprenticeship program, and had contacted a nearby night school about finishing up his degree through their work-study arrangement. Feeling very proud of his (un-typically) thorough planning, he approached his parents for permission, and was devastated to find his father furious with the idea. He had anticipated both parents' happy agreement, as they all had discussed his school problems recently, and were hoping for some redeeming plan.

As Alan was quite upset about this, he brought it up again in the next family counselling session with me. Since I had requested the week before that the family bring along their collection of old family photos dating back to the parents' own childhood years, I decided to find out what Alan's father had been like at the same age. I thought it might help to at least partially de-fuse their sudden polarities by having Alan and his Dad attempt to step into each other's shoes for a while to see if reversing roles might shed some light on their communication breakdown.

As Father began to use the photos as the focus for talking about his own teenage years, his voice shifted into "being there" in those old photos (pictures of him as a youth

working on the old farm, the desolate environment, the long walk to school, the one-room schoolhouse, and other memories that came back as the old snapshots triggered additional associations). He shared the many feelings he had felt in those days, and then he paused and looked rather surprised at some sudden inner realization that had just revealed itself.

He then told Alan, "I guess I was angry with you because to me, school was my only chance out of that awful place, and so when my own Dad died, and they pulled me out of school at age 15, I thought my world and any chance I'd had for escaping it had ended forever. I swore then that any kids I ever fathered would never have to leave school, that they'd never have to suffer what I had. I guess all this got in my way when I heard you say you wanted to drop out, angry bells started ringing in my head, and it's only now that I finally realize why I took your news so badly. OK, so now tell me again what you're wanting to do, and this time I will try to keep my ears open and my mouth shut till you finish. Maybe we can work something out". With tears in their eyes, they smiled at each other and began talking.

PhotoTherapy -- The Bigger Picture

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 moment. It joins the physical world with the psychic one, the reality we are aware of with 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 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 consciously emerge.

Since PhotoTherapy involves people interacting with their own unique visual constructions of reality, these techniques can be particularly successful with people for whom verbal communication is physically, mentally, or emotionally limited, socioculturally marginalized, or situationally inappropriate due to misunderstanding of nonverbal cues.

And, since PhotoTherapy is about photography-as-communication rather than photography-as-art, any trained mental health professional can learn how to incorporate these techniques into their repertoire of helping skills, regardless of their conceptual framework, preferred intervention model, or particular theoretical approach.

As the general public becomes increasingly comfortable with using electronic technology and digital imagery, more exciting possibilities arise for using photos as counselling tools with clients who have scanners, digital cameras, photo-manipulation software, family websites, and/or those who are able to participate in online cyber-therapy.

In summary, since PhotoTherapy is a collection of flexible techniques, rather than fixed directives based upon only one specific theoretical modality or therapeutic paradigm, it can be used by any trained therapist, especially those interested in Art Therapy, Narrative Therapy, Family Systems, Gestalt, Jungian, and other techniques that similarly draw from imagery from the client's unconscious.

Doing good therapy, and doing it well, is itself an art -- and one which needs as many intervention tools as possible for helping a client in the most beneficial way. And this is what PhotoTherapy is all about: when a client interacts with a snapshot, whether by viewing, posing for, taking, reconstructing, remembering or just imagining it, he or she can get a far better "picture" of their life than words alone could ever provide!

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Director of the PhotoTherapy Centre in Vancouver, Judy Weiser is a psychologist and art therapist specializing in both PhotoTherapy Techniques and HIV/AIDS psychotherapy (particularly in the Aboriginal community). In addition to her book, "[*PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*](#)", and her website for the field "[*PhotoTherapy Techniques in Counseling and Therapy*](#)", she consults, lectures, and gives frequent training workshops in these techniques -- and has published [numerous book chapters and professional articles](#) on these topics. For more information, e-mail her at: JWeiser@phototherapy-centre.com .

For Author's Publications and Article References, see next page.....

Author's Publications* on PhotoTherapy

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A brief list of "Recommended Readings" helpful for learning more about this field, can be found at:

http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/recommended_readings.htm

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