PhotoTherapy Centre
1027 Davie St., #607 Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6E 4L2
604-689-9709 | jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com
www.phototherapy-centre.com

Photos OF Clients

Photos of Clients Taken by Other People

Photos of people that are taken by others let them view the many different ways that other people see them. It also allows them to see how they look when their face and body image is not reversed in a mirror. Being photographed can provide an opportunity for social interaction based upon being the focus of attention for others, which may or may not be comfortable or desired!

People rarely take the time to consider how they unconsciously visually communicate information about themselves to those viewing them (or their photos), yet many of these silent messages directly influence the perceptions of others. When viewing photos of themselves by others, people are frequently surprised to see quite a different self than the one they had presumed would appear there!

Photos of a person are taken either spontaneously without their knowledge or while they are aware of the camera. If aware they are being photographed, they can choose whether or not to change their behaviour in response to the camera and photographer watching them. Even if trying to act naturally as if not aware of the camera's presence, the simple difference of knowing they are being watched will always alter the apparent naturalness of the situation, just because of the additional layer of knowing that the photographer-observer is present.

If the person is aware of the camera and poses for it, then what gets photographed is their "posing behaviour" (how they hope to appear in the finished picture). If the person is instead posed by the photographer, then the resulting photo will end up being the photographer's version of that person and the results measured in terms of the photographer's goals rather than the subject's. Either way, the visual message that a person thinks they are communicating to their photographer will very likely not be the same as what appears in the finished photo.

However, if the person is photographed while completely unaware of being photographed, then an altogether different self will be visually captured than in the first two kinds of photos above. Who the person is naturally — when not being watched — can provide a good contrast for further study.

Therefore, it could be very interesting for people to compare posed with un-posed photos of themselves — as well as photos taken of them by a variety of different photographers — in order to see how each photographer's images (perceptions) of them differ. This will, of

course, also be affected by the different kind of relationship they have with each photographer involved. It is also useful to explore how a person would alter their usual behaviour, appearance, or body language if they suddenly became aware that someone is photographing them.

How This Technique Works

In contrast with self-portrait PhotoTherapy techniques, where clients work with photos they make of themselves without outside intervention, this technique involves photos of clients where someone else made most of the decisions about when, where, how, and why — or even if — they are to be photographed. In this kind of situation, the client has much less control over the photographic results, even when posing for the photographer.

Since viewing other people's photos of them gives clients an idea of how they present themselves to the world, having the chance to actually dialogue with others about these photographs can give clients valuable clues about themselves. For example, clients may gain insight about how congruent their self-perceptions (and intended visual communication of self-image) are with those visual messages actually received by others who are viewing or photographing them.

This can be a less-threatening channel for receiving interpersonal feedback than if given directly face-to-face, because the different personal images being compared are more safely at "arm's length". When clients start to realize how differently several people photograph the "real" them, they can begin to better appreciate the fuller flexibility of their personal identity and thus discover the wider range of possibilities that exist for them to explore. This can also be a good way to repair distorted self-perceptions.

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 by having their picture — and thus some power — over them.

As a result of these dynamics, it can be very beneficial to probe which pictures of themselves clients feel are most truthful about themselves (which photographer best knows their “real” self) — and compare these with their own self-portrait images they have made of themselves. Who a client permits to keep pictures of themselves signals who they most trust with a part of themselves, even if only in symbolic form. Who they choose to be photographed together with (and how) also crystallizes a lot of information about their relationship (and degrees of comfort or trust) with these people.

Clients can be asked to bring to therapy sessions photos of themselves that already exist — especially those that they strongly like or dislike — which could be used to illustrate their life story, or show aspects of themselves that are different from what the therapist might be observing during counselling sessions. Photos of them alone can be compared with photos of

them in the company of others, and spontaneously-taken snapshots with more formally-posed ones. Those taken in professional portrait studios can be studied as finished products — or re-taken as the client desires, to explore any changes as therapy progresses.

Clients can also be assigned to have new pictures taken of themselves, such as one photo taken by each of their friends or family members, and then again to be photographed together with each of these people individually. Examining and contrasting the various results can trigger a lot of previously-unconscious information, secrets or stories useful for the therapy process.

As with the other four PhotoTherapy techniques, *Photos OF Clients* 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

Ask other people to photograph you:

"In your favorite place"

"As they think you look at your best (or worst)"

"While you are feeling good"

"While you are doing something you enjoy (or dislike) doing"

"While you don't know you are being photographed"

"While you are posing as if for a formal portrait"

"While you seem to be in different moods"

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.**

An Example of this Technique Being Used[1]

When asked to find some photographs (from the therapist's collection of dozens of photos) that reminded her of herself as a child, one client selected this image of a toddler seated on a chair, holding a teddy bear.

Though it was not taken of herself, she said it could easily have been a picture of her at that age. She had been commenting for weeks about how uncomfortable she felt when being photographed by others, and that even when she wanted to have her picture taken for her own self-promotional business purposes, she inevitably stiffened at the last moment and experienced vague feelings of fear or anxiety when confronted by the camera lens.

She kept expressing concern for the child's well-being, saying it appeared "endangered", so her therapist asked her to talk with it for a while. Then the therapist asked her if she would be willing to try to "become" that child inside her mind, to emotionally move into that image.

She agreed, and positioned herself into as close to the same pose and body language as possible. After letting her sit there in silence at first so that she could feel the emotional space she had put herself in, the therapist then began to question her as if she actually were that child:

> "How old are you?", she was asked. "Two," she replied immediately. "What is happening right now?" "Someone is taking my picture," she replied with a quavering tone in her voice. "Can you tell me more about that?" "He's big and tall and has a camera pointed right at me, and -- oh, it's going to hurt...", she suddenly interjected.
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> Continuing this process of being that child, she revealed her feelings of knowing that "that man" who was taking her picture was to be feared and avoided. After more dialogue, the therapist brought her back into the present time, making sure that she also consciously carried along the memory of the dialogue which had just taken place a few minutes earlier at a deeper level.
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> As co-investigators, they tried to find out why that inner association had formed between the photo-posing and such strong negative emotions. The therapist asked her to re-connect with that child's feelings and think whether she could remember any time in her own life when she had herself also experienced those same kind of feelings.

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

She suddenly remembered that her mother had told her that in her early childhood she was so cute that she had been selected by one of those baby-calendar companies to be used as one of their models for illustrating their pages (where the child was photographed making funny faces and then later captions were added to complete the joke the face was supposedly signalling a response to).

But one day her mother discovered that, in order to produce these unusual faces, the photographers (all men) routinely physically and emotionally abused the children, by doing things like sticking pins in them near their diapers or armpits (where the wounds wouldn't be noticeable), as well as teasing them, offering toys or candy kept just out of reach, and so forth, in order to get those "cute" animated faces. So her mother refused to let this continue and never took her back there again.

Thus, in the client's earliest memory long before she ever had words to communicate about such a experience, a strong negative emotion had been permanently bonded to the unconscious memory of having a camera pointed at her.

This memory was so strong that it still existed inside her thirty years later, and it had remained so painfully unvalidated and unresolved that it had never before become conscious enough to be therapeutically processed and worked through to removing its power on her adult life.

