



PhotoTherapy Centre

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Comparing PhotoTherapy and Art Therapy

PhotoTherapy and Art Therapy are not mutually exclusive intervention techniques — rather, they are integrally interrelated, reciprocal sub-sets of each other, even though different in 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.

All Arts (and Creative Arts / Expressive) Therapies are based on the idea that symbolic representation of inner sensory-based information and experience will always be a lot less distorted or abbreviated than solely-verbal interpretations can ever be. Thus each time people create or view drawings or photographs, they will always be simultaneously projecting unconscious information through metaphoric communications emerging from deep inside themselves.

When people look at art or photos they themselves created, and review the themes, messages, and emotional content unknowingly embedded in these, they are able to learn more about their own unconscious inner life. In communicating more directly with the unconscious, visual symbols permit the natural bypassing of verbal "filters" (and accompanying rationalizations, excuses, and similar protective defences) that automatically limit clients' direct connection with powerful feelings, thoughts, and memories.

In both PhotoTherapy and Art Therapy, such symbolic communications arise unmediated, directly from the client's unconscious — serving as only the first of many layers of potential meaning that a trained therapist must help that person explore. As Krauss notes¹:

"Although both Art Therapy and PhotoTherapy utilize the methodology of pictorial projection, it would seem initially that they do so in very different ways. Art Therapy relies on a client's internal concerns to emerge from the unconscious through the process of a drawing spontaneously produced by the client — and external stimuli, light, or content need not be available at the time the client draws a picture for an image to appear in the drawing...

"Photographs, on the other hand, will be taken at the place where the physical content actually exists [or its symbolized form appears or is arranged to appear]. A photograph of a house will use as content some physical representation of a house.

"Since Art Therapy is dependent on externalized internal subjects, and PhotoTherapy is dependent on internalized external subjects, it appears as though they deal with different aspects of personal symbolism."

¹ Dr. David Krauss, in Weiser, J. (1993/1999) *PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*, pp. 10-11.

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One of the other main differences between the two fields is the relative degree of ease, familiarity, and social comfort ("user-friendliness") that most clients experience while taking, showing, and talking about photographs — in contrast with expressing themselves creatively using other art media such as drawing or painting.

Rarely do people view a work of art without unconsciously realizing that it expresses the personal viewpoint of its maker, because attribution of a work of art is usually inherently part of its meaning. Yet somehow a photograph is automatically perceived as being a factual image, one which anyone passing by with a camera at that same time could have just as easily taken — because, of course, "the scene was there already and the mechanical camera just captured its reality".

Therefore, when examining the scene captured in someone else's photograph, people unconsciously assume that this is exactly the same "reality" they would have actually seen there themselves, too, if only they had been there. This conceptual difference is a major one — people do not view a photograph with the realization that what they are looking at was created by technology; instead they perceive it as if that moment alive, in three dimensions, as if happening right now, and they are standing there in front of it, being part of that experience.

Speculation about the goals, needs, feelings, or hopes of a photograph's originator can be built into the therapeutic investigation in ways not possible with artistic creations. And since the creator of a photograph can be so readily detached from its image results, PhotoTherapy techniques often include the use of photos not created by the client (a much less common experience in working with art expressions within Art Therapy practice).

Krauss² further points out the additional value of the documentary-narrative aspects of photos which form clients' personal histories: "Personal and family photographs... [are] a rich source of projective and physical data that could not be obtained any other way. They provide background information about a client's relationship to the world outside of therapy" including that of their family members and how they relate with one another as captured by a camera rather than words.

One of the biggest additional benefits of using photographs in addition to personal art expressions in therapy work is that clients can view themselves in ways not possible without a camera. They can see how they actually physically appear to others, as opposed to seeing a horizontally-reversed image of themselves in a mirror. They can view parts of themselves not usually available for self-observation (for example, their profile or back, what they look like while asleep or caught in mid-motion, and so forth). They get to see themselves while being a member of larger groups like family, friends, or co-workers.

² *ibid*, p. 11

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It is difficult for drawings to do this in a non-subjective way. And since photographic representations of themselves are fixed in time and space by a supposedly-objective mechanical device, clients naturally presume that such photos are somehow more truthful in what they show than artists' more subjectively-drawn portraits.

Memories and feelings do not communicate directly in words — they flow whether or not they are being noticed or believed. When people pause to describe or explain them, this very act automatically alters what is being experienced or observed. Much like Quantum Physics teaches, it is nearly impossible to be simultaneously experiencing a feeling and talking about it at the same time.

For this reason, nonverbal sensory-based therapy techniques — especially those of PhotoTherapy or Art Therapy (or, even better, both combined!) — are the most appropriate approaches for working with the primarily-visual metaphorical language of the unconscious!

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