

PhotoTherapy and Therapeutic Photography Techniques in Multicultural Art Therapy Practice and Research

Abstract / Description

The meaning, or "feeling", of any photograph is commonly believed to come from that image itself; however this is actually (phenomenologically) projected *by* each viewer *during* their process of perceiving it. This holds true for all photos that people take, pose for, look at, collect, imagine, or remember -- whether in their own personal collections or in galleries (Comfort, 1985; Krauss, 1980, 1983a/b; Ruby, 1981; Walker 1981, 1986; Weiser, 1999). Therefore, *any* time a photograph is viewed or recalled, projection of meaning *always* takes place -- and associated feelings are automatically, though often unconsciously, triggered!

This means that the importance of a personal snapshot lies less in what it is *of*, visually, than in what it is *about*, emotionally. And therefore, the meaning of any photograph (as constructed by its maker) will usually not be the same as its "story" when later perceived by other viewers. And *all* of this is dependent upon (and reflective of) each person's underlying value system, beliefs, personal constructs, etc. -- plus resulting judgments and expectations these produce.

People's personal and cultural values inexorably frame their expectations, actually *defining* what they notice. These unconscious filters through which people live their daily lives (and communicate), are formed by not just their own life experiences, but also their own particular background matrix of cultural, racial, gender, familial, societal and other "differences" that have come together to create who they are at that moment.

All "personal/cultural lenses" through which people view photographs (and each other, as well as life itself!) are therefore automatically and unconsciously created, framed, defined, and perceptually-activated by such "differences that make a difference" (selectively) to each of them, *whether or not* these are at all obvious to any therapist trying to help them. And because this all happens inside a split-second of communication, these kinds of ego-centric and ethno-centric "selective perceptions" will deeply impact and affect *all* therapy process, especially for clients (or therapists!) who are from non-mainstream cultures, races, genders, etc.

And since most of these factors filter even verbal discussions, PhotoTherapy techniques (especially when combined with Art Therapy; for example Landgarten, 1993) can be particularly effective as additional tools for probing these "deeper unconscious layers where words don't usually go" and helping improve personal insight and communication by bringing to light those differences which people are always strongly affected by -- yet which they may previously have been unaware of the effects of.

PhotoTherapy techniques have been used effectively in Multicultural/ Diversity therapy practice for over three decades (Weiser 1975, 1983, 1988a, 1988b, 1999) -- as well as in special education (Nath, 1984a/b), research (Ziller, 1975, 1981, 1990), and other settings

where awareness of differential perceptions (and personal expectations based on these) form crucial components that affect the communication process involved. Yet each new technological advance opens up new frontiers and possibilities.

This Presentation by a Presenter with over thirty years of PhotoTherapy experience with clients from marginalized/disenfranchised cultures will provide the background rationale and theoretical foundations for using ordinary snapshots and family photos as a bridge into emotions, memories, feelings, and information otherwise inaccessible to verbal interactions alone -- and demonstrate how these can be effective in bringing to conscious awareness some of the underlying differences that can complicate therapy process, if such effects are not recognized.

Beginning with an overview to PhotoTherapy, Therapeutic Photography, and Photo Art Therapy (Weiser, 2000, 2004a/b, 2005) Presenter will use case illustrations to show how these have proven particularly useful for working with individuals and groups where perceptions, values, or expectations due to cultural differences often invisibly affect their interactions with those trying to help them (for example, minority gender (Barbee, 2002), race (Hubbard, 1994; Masayesva & Younger; 1983), class (Milgram & Banish, 1977), and/or disability/health-based issues (such as HIV-related stigma).

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Objectives:

Those attending will be able to:

- 1) Explain the differences between "PhotoTherapy", "Therapeutic Photography", and "Photo Art Therapy",
- 2) Explain the concept of ethnocentric perceptual reality creation (derived from cultural anthropology) and its relevance for visual-based therapies or sensitizing of those who work (or do research) with diverse populations.
- 3) Explain why and how PhotoTherapy techniques are particularly beneficial (especially when combined with art techniques) for multicultural art therapy and/or diversity-related research.