

THE USE OF AMBIGUOUS ARTISTIC IMAGES FOR ENHANCING SELF-AWARENESS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Enhancing self-awareness is central to the psychodynamically oriented therapies (Sandler, Dare & Holder, 1972). Self-awareness is taken to mean the conscious understanding of some important fact, affect or relationship which was previously unavailable to the client. Several techniques have evolved to assist clients discover important aspects of themselves and their relationships with others. These include confrontation, interpretation, free association and working through (Greenson, 1967). Among others, these techniques represent some of the therapist's most basic tools, and are often successful at overcoming resistance and contributing to the client's self-awareness. However, these techniques also have the characteristics of simultaneously arousing one or more of the client's defenses, thereby working against the very goal they are designed to achieve.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the use of ambiguous, artistic photographs as a tool for enhancing self-awareness in psychotherapy. The argument is made that this approach is successful where others have failed precisely because it is less likely not to arouse the client's defenses, while it simultaneously stimulates his/her imagination and fantasies.

These photographs were taken by the author and have been exhibited in galleries in New York, Toronto, Mexico City and elsewhere. Initially, these photographs were hung in the author's office. After several patients spontaneously made reference to the photos, often in quite dramatic ways, the author began using the photos in a more systematic way to assist patients increase their self-awareness.

The notion that artistic and/or ambiguous im-

ages can stimulate self-awareness has several sources. Ahsen (1982), for example, indicates that "the main function of an art object is to free consciousness from subservience to mere memory recall. . ." (p. 213). Further, he states that the "Magicality of the art object derives from us the way it obliterates the boundaries between I and it, between the inner and outer . . . to kindle a perception in our minds which would otherwise be foreign or unavailable" (p. 217). Studies indicate that ambiguity can serve to stimulate exploration and attempts by the individual to understand the meaning underlying the ambiguity (Zachary, 1982). If successful in unravelling this meaning, the result is often a sensation of joy or elation (Izard, 1977; Singer, 1974).

Figures 1 and 2 are two of the images referred to later in the paper. The originals are 16" x 20" cibachrome prints. Viewers' reactions to these images were often based on themes related to power, sexuality, death and relationships.

The use of images in psychiatry has largely been restricted to projective tests such as the Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Test (Exner, 1978; Henry, 1956). These tests have proven to be useful diagnostic tools for therapists over the last fifty years. However, these tools contribute to the therapist's awareness of the client and not necessarily to the client's self-awareness. Furthermore, these devices have the disadvantages of being time consuming to administer and of alerting the client to the fact of being tested. In addition, the images themselves are of little or no artistic interest, further reinforcing the client's consciousness of being in a clinical situation. How this awareness of being confronted with a clinical task actually distorts a

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Fig. 1

client's responses or strengthens his/her defenses is unknown.

An earlier paper (Walker, 1985) has described how these artistic images have been helpful in overcoming some very deep-seated resistances in clients, often in a dramatic manner. The focus of the present paper is how these images may be helpful for enhancing self-awareness in clients who are not necessarily blocking some specific emotionally-laden affect.

Case 1: Mr. A.

Mr. A is a 23-year old, unmarried student preparing for his chartered accountant's (C.A.) exams. He is extremely bright and articulate. He has been a consistent A student, captain of the football team and president of the Student

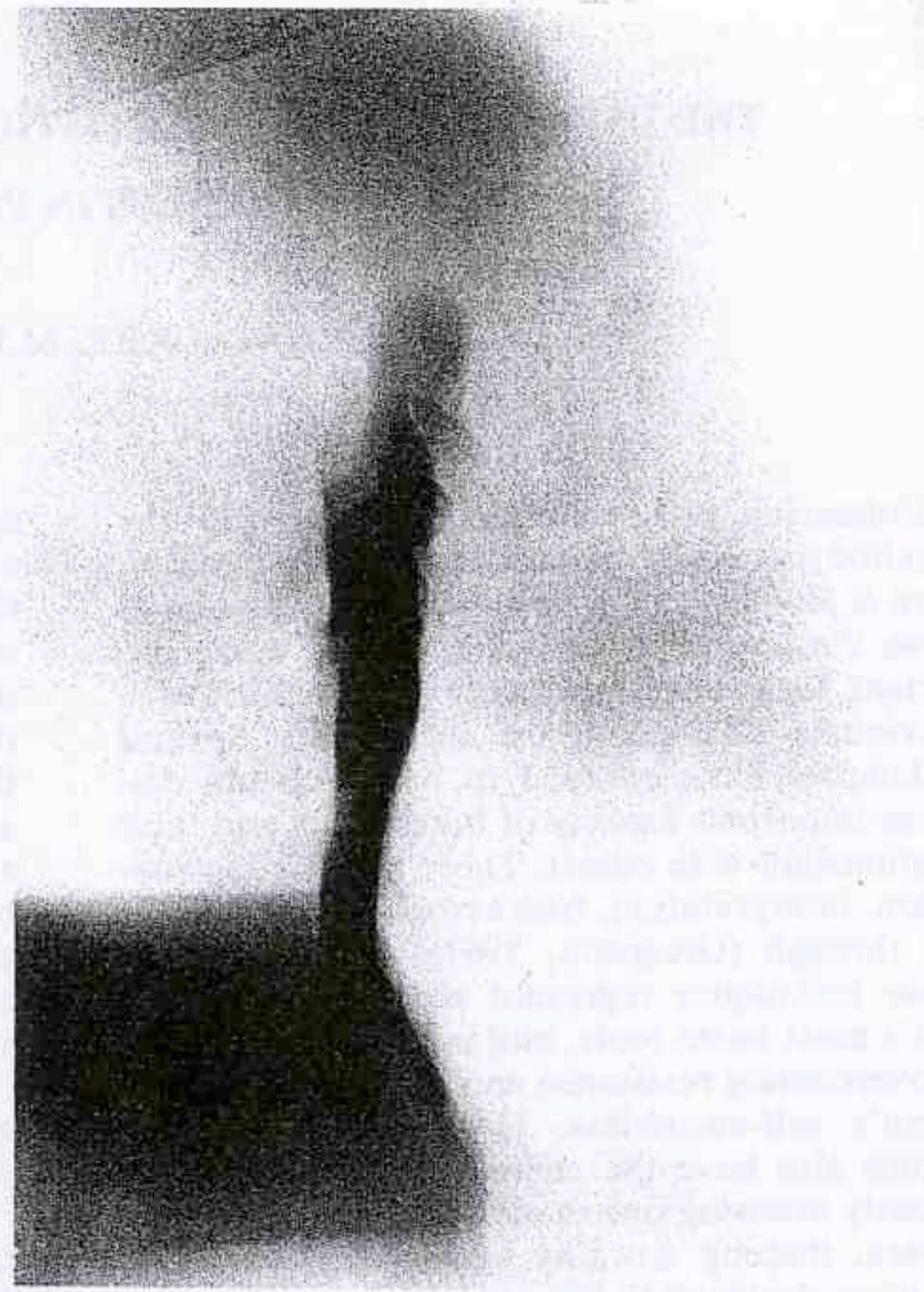


Fig. 2

Council. The presenting problem was anxiety regarding his fear of failure, fear of becoming so anxious in the exams that he wouldn't be able to function effectively. A further presenting problem was fear of violence regarding women he could dominate. He is the youngest and the only male in an Italian family. In our work together he would tell me everything that he felt was relevant about himself so that I might understand who he was and why he is the person he is. Nevertheless, I found it difficult to formulate the case and understand the underlying dynamics. For the first three months of therapy prior to his C.A. exams, the focus was mainly supportive regarding his exams. We explored his need to do well. He had never failed at anything before in his life. He is a perfectionist, obsessive. It is hard for him not to be right or to accept criticism. Everyone

expects him to do well. Yet, he lacks self-confidence. He believes that one has to display control to others in order to control one's interior. Therefore, he keeps his feelings to himself. On the other hand, he is afraid that everything will fall apart. He needs a lot of direction and structure to function effectively.

In the first session following his excellent exam results he commented that the exams had overshadowed everything in therapy and that it was important for us to really get a clearer perspective on the underlying issues and conflicts in his life. I asked him to talk about his thoughts, feelings and fantasies regarding one of my images. He said, "It looks like a horse. It's sort of heavenly with dark clouds and sunset below. Someone is riding the horse. It's comic, not real, like a horse that flies. A horse looking down at the earth below it. The rider is in the dark clouds. There's a lot of green at the top. I'm having a hard time getting into the structure. The top part is a cape and the wind is whipping the cape up. When I look closely I see the image of a person with an alien head." I observed that he was laughing. He replied, "I'm laughing because I can't interpret what I'm saying. The question isn't direct so I can't come off feeling rosy. I don't have control. There's not much more I can see in this picture. What is this picture? It's got to be a horse." I said, "Does it matter?" He replied, "I'm interested in the technique. I never pictured myself doing this, looking at an obscure picture on a wall. How do I deal with it?"

Now I suggested that he place the title 'self-image' under this image and talk about his thoughts, feelings and fantasies. He responded, "It's blotched, not organized." I asked him how his self-image would look. He said, "I try to keep my image organized." I asked him what he was afraid of and he replied that "I'd look like a jerk or a turkey. That wouldn't be my image because I don't think that this image is me. Maybe last week it was blurred and partly dark. I'm having a hard time with the image because I can't relate to it."

To help him further, I put up another image and said, "Again place the title 'self-image' under this and talk about your thoughts, feelings and fantasies." "Someone is on a high post and

looking down at the world and figuring out where people should go. Or, it's a wonderful person who's leading people through rough times, like a god. My first reaction before you gave me the title of 'self-image' was of some guy committing suicide. But once you gave me the title I thought of what was favorable—a guardian, an angel." He continued, "If I was down there looking up at this guy, I'd think he was a turkey. This guy trying to be a god. He'll fall off and hurt himself. No one is with him. *He doesn't have many friends, which relates to why I am by myself a lot of the time.*¹ There's a black cloud hanging over him and he's pretty close to the edge. On top, yet close to the edge, ready to keel over if the wind blows. There's nothing else to hang onto."

He asked himself, "Why can't this guy just be a normal person and just walk with people below? This guy must get depressed a lot being up there by himself. It must be wonderful to be this guy because he has such a nice view. It's the highest spot and people have to look up to him. He doesn't leave anything to chance because everyone has to look up to him. For example, I stood in the top 20 in Canada in my exams. He doesn't have to depend on being one of the people below and then kiss up to these people. If you're part of the batch you can't please everybody. If you're on top, then you think you're doing them a big favor. This image is easier to deal with because there's more structure and it's closer to what I would draw as my self-image."

He said, "I think that the previous image was more depressing, just a blob. An artistic person with constant turmoil, but I feel like that a lot of the time. I try to avoid the first image, so I try to stay away from it. I like dealing with the second image better." He said later, "You know, I censor a lot of feelings."

During the following session and responding to the second image again, he said, "Being a plebeian is limiting in what you can do. It's harder to be just a number. It's harder to maintain your own self-image because it's such a rat race. Get up there and avoid it. In order to get to this place you have to impress people. The best way of getting up there is to be open and honest. The worst fear for me is for someone to find out I'm wrong, that I'm a jerk. I don't think I can get

¹Note the change of pronouns from the third person "he" to "I". This is typical of the subtle transition whereby clients come to realize that in talking about the image they are really talking about themselves.

there. Putting myself away from the rest of those people prevents me from getting hurt by them. The process of getting up there was by isolating myself and beating them in grades. If I'm with the plebs below, I'd be fighting for too small a piece of the pie for me. My problem is I need a huge piece of pie but I have been given it all my life. So, I've been striving for more pieces of pie. In high school, I also felt the pressure to do well. My mother's very protective of me. I'm the baby in this Italian family with two sisters who also spoil me. I'm worshipped in the family."

In the following session, I asked him some specific questions regarding the second image. "If you could change something in this picture what would it be?" He replied, "I don't like being that close to the edge. Not only because I have fear of heights, but it signifies that I'm teetering between extreme success and failure like with the C.A. exams. I either have to be in the top one percent or I think that I failed. It's perfection or nothing. Power and self-esteem, that's something to work towards. On the way to the top though, you get confronted by life's events. Regarding other events such as writing an article or going to grad school or teaching, I feel I'll be more in control because I'm making the choices. It won't be life and death for me. Maybe it's the risk-taking that gives you the reward. Sometimes I feel that the costs to get there are extremely high. Because I'm risking myself I've never experienced failure in this area. It's important for me to be successful and to be a nice guy too. Control my behavior, the situation and other people. I don't let them know that's going on so it doesn't affect others. I don't want to appear weak and dependent upon others."

"I take things too personally so I protect myself up there so I don't have to deal with the plebs. I feel too sensitive so I put myself on a pedestal." Out of interest, I suggest that we possibly turn our attention to the first image again, and he said, "I can't deal with that one; it's not structured enough to put me into any thought pattern. It's too hard to see anything. It's hard to see what kind of objects you are dealing with."

The use of the images involved selecting an image to which he could relate, a more concrete image. Although the image was relatively concrete, he was able to respond with thoughts, feel-

ings and fantasies. In the process he became aware of his ambivalence at having high expectations placed on him and began looking at some of the costs of this, especially in terms of his relationships. Subsequent sessions focused on his social relationships and how they could be improved.

Case 2: Ms. B.

Ms. B. is an intelligent, logical, obsessive, extremely well-organized, forty-year-old, divorced teacher, with extremely low self-esteem and very frightened. She quit teaching five years ago and has been unemployed since, except for the occasional part-time job. She has totally isolated herself, with no friends, and has no contact with relatives except her sister. She has no children and was under extreme financial stress (on welfare).

She presented in therapy with anxiety and depression. Initially, she was extremely guarded, suspicious and mistrustful. She was unwilling to open up at all. After every comment or look of mine she would ask, "Why are you asking me that? Why are you looking at me like that? Don't look at me." Following several sessions of this tremendous resistance, I decided to use the images. After persuading her that these images were not a test, and that I just wanted her to look at them and talk about whatever thoughts, feelings and fantasies came to mind, she got caught up in the experience of describing the images. She commented, "Tornado or hurricane, reminds me of a windstorm. Vast wasteland. Like looking at clouds. I think I see a man. It's beautiful—it's like looking out of the window at dusk and the colors change. I know that darkness will come."

On the surface she appears well-controlled and analytical, but actually is fearful, sensitive and imaginative. "What I feel inside, that's the part that gets hurt. I can't show it. It's too frightening—it's going to stay in. At first, I felt that I had no imagination."

She said that responding to the image allowed her to be more spontaneous and flexible, instead of seeing or doing things only one way. She commented, "This experience was a starting point. It convinced me that I had an imagination and it has allowed me to explore other facets of

me—not just one side. I began to realize that it was always there, maybe not such a bad part; perfection is very one-dimensional. It made me aware that there are sides of me that are natural. I was afraid of verbalizing it for fear it would spoil it or it might sound silly to others, yet it is important for me so I keep it inside. I have accomplished something this year in therapy. I always believed I was so rigid, controlled and organized, yet I was able to play with the image and see more than one thing; in fact, I saw many things.”

“I always thought of myself as rigid and by coming up with all these responses you helped me realize my vision wasn’t quite as narrow. You allowed me to talk about myself without talking directly to you but through the image. The image catches your attention. There is something in the image that reminds you of you or your life; it’s a symbol of something.”

In coming to understand her imaginative side and overcoming her fear of talking about her feelings, Ms. B. gained a new confidence in herself. She now feels she has something to share with others and has become much more socially active, both as an officer in her local Tenant’s Association and with various volunteer groups. She has also begun a much more aggressive job search.

Case 3: Mr. C.

Mr. C. is a bright, highly talented composer of music. He is unmarried, in his mid 30s, very active in causes of interest to him. He appears knowledgeable, has a presence of assuredness. His presenting problem was one of difficulty in relationships, primarily with women. The relationships he formed were of short duration; he was usually the one who made the break, complaining of boredom and loss of interest, although at first he was always quite interested. He is a very likable fellow, quite poised, with an easygoing style. After the initial history taking and his narration of what he perceived as his problems, I still found it difficult to get a sense of what the major underlying issues were. What was his real struggle about? What were the key dynamics in formulating this case? I remember feeling that I was not going to be able to help him. It was my own inability to formulate the case based on the

information I already had, or that by the traditional routes of verbal inquiry I had not been able to elicit.

Before I had a chance to suggest that we focus on the images, I saw him looking at one of them. I asked him what thoughts, feelings and fantasies this image elicited. He sat quietly for a long time, then said, “Two arms reaching out for something, wanting to embrace something. Is it because I want to open up? Is that why I’m here, because I want to do that more?”

“Now I see in the bottom right-hand corner a dinosaur. It makes me think of atavistic (before the flood) something primitive and uncivilized, but at the heart of things at the same time. It’s going in one direction and everything else in the opposite direction. I hope the dinosaur heading in the other direction is the old me and the creature (the horse) moving toward the light is the new me. I see it as a positive sign.”

“I just saw the horses of the apocalypse. It suggests me being judged, which I never enjoyed, but it also suggests a new beginning.” He then began to ask himself questions, for example, “Do I actively stay away from testing myself in larger areas where I don’t think I’ll succeed?” When I said it seemed to suggest judgment, he said, “I never thought of that before, but it seems to be something important. I don’t know why that image is so important all of a sudden. I think of being in high school and succeeding at everything. I still feel pressured to be best at everything I do.” I suggested we come back to the image, and we did in succeeding sessions. He was able to expand more and more on each image or symbol that he found within the image. It began to have more meaning for him.

When I asked him what part of the shape or color he identified with most in the picture, he said, “At this point I most identify with the animal as a symbol of me—the struggle which is my own—reaching for something else . . . I’m seeing tension and struggle in there . . . not going anywhere professionally and personally.”

In that session, his problem is in making decisions and his fear of making the wrong decisions. He’s always worried about the future. Due to the arrival of holidays, our next session was three weeks later, when I suggested he look at the image again, place the title “marriage” under the picture and talk about his thoughts, feelings and

fantasies. I suggested this because I recognized he was having many concerns and anxiety about making a commitment towards a new relationship.

"... the sense of the struggle is there, that marriage won't be easy. I haven't given much thought to that in the past. In the past, I thought relationships would work out without much effort . . . This creature is going in opposite directions suggesting it will have to be a mutually supportive thing. In the past, I've allowed myself to be pampered, to be the central person, to take more than I give. In the past, I thought relationships would get in the way of my music; I don't feel that now. Music stuff is only a small but strong part of that picture."

"If you were going to be anything in this picture, what would you be?" "The central creature . . . maybe I don't want to stay in that picture anymore. I've been suspended too long in this world spinning my wheels in terms of relationships I've had and maybe it's time to blast off . . . I'm a bit surprised by my reaction to that image. When I thought about long-term relationships in the past, I thought about a lot of negatives. (Why it would fall apart in six months, or if maybe I made the wrong decisions.) Originally, I saw a lot more negatives in this image. My surprise now is the number of positive things in relation to marriage as a projection. I was the central figure. Am I headed in the right direction? Yes. In the past, I might have identified with the phantom going in a different direction than anyone else. I don't feel that way much anymore."

I asked him if he were going to be a color, which color would he be? He responded, "I'd want to be all of them because I am experiencing a lot more than what I have allowed myself until now. Allowing myself to be angry, peaceful, introspective, excited or earthy. The image is heading toward the white light, which is a combination of all the colors. It's the ultimate end there."

Inasmuch as he was concerned about a marriage possibly breaking down within six months, I suggested that he place the title 'marriage six months in the future' under the image and asked him about the image again. He responded, "I see little turmoil in there—there is some darkness before it gets to light. I want to be at a point where I can make a commitment. When will I make these commitments? I don't want to fail at something."

At the next session, he began by saying, "For one hour per week I close my eyes and think of the picture, when I want to think about how I feel about something—working on how to get in touch with my feelings. I've hidden a lot of things for a long time."

At a later session, he came in and informed me that he was now engaged to be married. He said, "The future is clearer for me now. There's a new beginning. I feel very different. I find myself getting closer to my friends and being able to relax with them. I'm even beginning to ask others for help and support."

DISCUSSION

The above cases are examples of how these artistic, ambiguous images stimulated various levels of self-awareness, whereas more traditional techniques were unsuccessful. In two of the cases, the clients were explicitly asked to focus on and respond to the images. In one of the examples (Mr. C.), the client spontaneously focused on the image. The inherent interest clients show in the images is one of the qualities which I believe make them useful tools for enhancing self-awareness.

Because of their artistic qualities, the images invite exploration, and because they are also ambiguous, they require clients to project their own thoughts, feelings and fantasies onto them in order to interpret them. Because clients feel they are describing an inherently exciting external object (the image) their typical defenses are reduced. Often, the point at which they realize they are really talking about themselves as they ostensibly describe the image is the point at which they "lose themselves" in their description of the image. The revelations about the self which so often emerge are of such inherent interest, they absorb the clients' attention, and thereby continue to reduce the elicitation of defenses.

One aspect of clients' reactions to the images is most striking—they become highly involved with one or more of the images. Some clients will use the same image repeatedly (without assistance) to help themselves deal with particular issues and concerns. Many characteristics of clients' reactions to the images are similar to those which describe play behavior (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1977; Ellis, 1973; Piaget, 1962). Clients spontaneously use the images, and

for highly personal and idiosyncratic reasons. The ambiguity of the images creates a certain tension and dissonance (Berlyne, 1960), which is resolved according to rules established by the clients, as determined by their own highly idiosyncratic needs. Both in play and in the clients' involvement with the images there is a "flow" experience in which the participants are totally absorbed in the activity itself, unencumbered by rules, regulations or defense mechanisms (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1977).

The ambiguous but evocative nature of the images invites free association. Themes which typically emerge from analyses of various responses to these images are of a primal nature—death, sexuality, hostility, fear, aspirations, etc. Clients' free associations may therefore be subtly guided by these latent themes in the images.

What is most important, however, is what clients bring to the task. The images are just a trigger, a tool for them to let their imaginations go. The stream of thought triggered by the photographs provides ongoing feedback and actually contributes to the clients' creations of new images which have a unique and very personal meaning. As in the above cases, the results often reveal ambivalence and aspirations previously not acknowledged (Mr. A.), dimensions of the self previously suppressed (Ms. B.), or allow the client to safely explore the implications of a difficult decision and adjust to the consequences (Mr. C.). As the clients talk and describe the images, the themes which repeat themselves take on a special significance for them. What is most important, from a therapeutic perspective, is that clients often come to an increased level of self-awareness by listening to themselves. The self-discovery allows clients to "own" their insights and thereby act on these new insights to make changes in their lives.

The therapist's role when using the images is to gently guide the clients. This guidance need not be in any particular direction (although it may be if testing a specific hypothesis). The initial guidance is simply to get the clients to relax and feel comfortable when responding to the images. If the clients' arousal levels are high, the images are less likely to be useful and may be contraindicated. Clients should not feel forced to respond. Only general questions are asked of them at first, allowing them to define their own path.

As particular themes emerge in their clients' descriptions, therapists may shape more specific questions or tasks. Often this is unnecessary, and is required only if there is blockage or there is trouble in deciding on the priority to be given to the multiple themes elicited by the images. In making a choice of image the therapist may be guided by the desire to test a specific hypothesis (some images are more likely to elicit certain themes), or by the more general wish to help clients explore their own imagination. The same care required in putting any stimuli before clients (verbal or nonverbal) must be maintained.

The use of these images need not be a substitute for the more traditional techniques of enhancing self-awareness. However, some theorists have advocated the use of imagery as a primary modality in its own right (Ahsen, 1968, 1979, 1981, 1982). At the very least, the images may be used as a powerful supplement to traditional techniques, especially where those techniques arouse strong defenses.

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