The Psychologically Beneficial Aspects of Photography

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Abstract

This paper reviews the literature concerning therapeutic photography and phototherapy, how photographs reflect personality and lifestyle,, and how online photosharing can be therapeutic. In a study involving seven participants, the subjects were instructed to use a 24 exposure film camera to “take photos of anything you find interesting, or that is important to you and your life.” A week later, the subjects were given the Quality of Life Scale and interviewed using standard phototherapy questions in order to assess their association to photos that they remembered (“conscious photos”) as well as those they forgot (“unconscious photos”). It was found that the unconscious photographs typically related to the negative aspects of a person’s life, while the conscious photographs related to either the positive aspects or desires for relaxation and calmness. Positive life experiences as portrayed in conscious photographs reflected the ways in which the individual attempts to cope with the negative life situations indicated in the unconscious photographs. The conscious photographs also revealed negative areas of life experience that were recently improved or addressed.
The psychodynamic and humanistic therapies suggest the belief that a person has to understand him or herself better to fix the presenting or underlying problem. The psychologist is a guide and along with different exercises and techniques helps their client to find insight. Insight is a personal awareness of how and why a person feels and behaves the way they do. Sigmund Freud suggested that certain memories were repressed and forced into the unconscious and by finding insight the person recovers and works through these memories and all emotions and symptoms that result from them. Insight allows a person to better understand themselves and their emotions. In doing so they create more choices for themselves and understand which choices are best for them (Morris, 1990).

There are many ways that photographs are used therapeutically and dozens of techniques in which they are used within therapy. Creating, viewing, or sharing photographs are different ways that all of these techniques assist in therapy. Sometimes words are unable to express emotions and thoughts that the use of photography or photographs allows. Judy Weiser attributes five techniques in the practice of Phototherapy. The first is using photographs, which have been taken or created by the client. These photographs are used because the person created this photograph for a reason and that reason contains important psychological and emotional information about the person. Photographs of the clients taken by other people allow the client to see the many ways that other people view them. Self-portraits or photographs made by the client of themselves allows the client to explore themselves as well as assist in the conversation about the way in which the client views themselves. Family albums or any photographs that the client has saved
show who and what is valued in the clients world and may create a story of the clients past as well as current lifestyle. Finally, there are photo-projective situations which is the client discovers personal meanings and memories while viewing any photograph. A famous quote sometimes attributed says, “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Through photographs and the reactions that they invoke in people, therapists are able to approach their client’s needs from an entirely different angle, often discovering underlying thoughts and feelings.

**Therapeutic Photography**

Therapeutic Photography is any self-initiated activity that is also self-conducted and is centered on photography, but includes no formal therapy. The pursuit of photography as a form of self-help is usually done as a means to gain personal insight, or a better understanding of one’s self. It could also be used to gain a mastery over a certain element of a person’s life. Although often started alone, people conducting therapeutic photography sometimes join themed groups or contribute to a project in which others have also contributed to. These groups are not guided by a therapist or other counseling professional but maintained by the individual members. The distinction between people who just do photography and people who knowingly participate in photography as a form of self-therapy may best be described in three stages.

Professor Joel Morgovsky of Brookdale Community College, NJ suggests that the ability of a photographer to express their thoughts and emotions develops through three stages (DynamicS, n.d.). The first stage, “Innocents”, involves those who periodically take photographs for personal reasons and includes the majority of
camera users. The next stage of photographers is labeled “Amateurs”. Amateurs are the individuals who analyze and discuss matters relating to photography and photographs. The final stage, where photography is consciously used as a form of creative self-expression is termed “Mature photographers”.

The work done by Jo Spence (Dennett, 2009) is a wonderful example of therapeutic photography. Techniques taught to Jo Spence by Keith Kennedy, an art and drama teacher at the Henderson Psychiatric Hospital, eventually lead to Spence’s self-initiated photography as a form of self-help after a diagnosis of breast cancer in 1982 (Dennett, 2009). Jo Spence began taking photographs for her “visual illness diaries”. She created these albums on a regular basis. One of the first techniques that Spence used was “therapeutic staging” where she re-enacted her body’s struggle for survival. She then moved on to using mirrors in her photographs. This “mirror therapy” is a way to watch your own process of taking photographs of yourself. Unlike having another person take the photographs, using a mirror allows a person to be uninhibited because a mirror is unable to pass judgment. Finally “scripting”, where an entire photo shoot is imagined and planned out prior to taking the photographs was used during Spence’s therapeutic photography. Eventually Jo Spence began to work in collaboration with professional therapists but her early work is a strong testament to the positives of therapeutic photography.

Essentially Jo Spence used self-portraiture. Self-portraiture is a specific aspect of therapeutic photography. “On your own, you can learn a lot about yourself from self-portraits” (Suler, 2009a). Portraying yourself in different ways can be used as a form of personal expression of who you are, what you’re feeling, even whom
you want to be. The understanding of yourself and who you are is knowledge that
many cultures and religions strongly value. Through this form of personal
photography a deeper understanding of the self is attainable. Aside from the
therapeutic aspect of knowing who you are, the use of self-portraits in therapeutic
photography can also help with self-actualization when a self-portrait is used to
provide proof that you posses the ability to strive for the possibilities of what you
can become; becoming the ultimate you often makes life more heartening.

Every photograph is a representation of some characteristic of whoever took
it. This establishes a relationship and allows the capacity for that characteristic to be
controlled by or mastered by the photographer. Dr. John Suler in his online book
"Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche" (Suler, n.d.a) describes that through a
photograph the photographer is able to “capture their relationship to the subject”
(Suler, n.d.b). The photographer, through their camera as well as post processing,
gains control over the subject that is in the photograph. This ability to connect with
and even control the subject of their photograph could understandably be cathartic
for the photographer.

Often our thoughts and emotions interfere with our awareness; we are living
inside our mind opposed to experiencing the life we are actually living. Through the
camera lens people let go of their objective view of the world and begin to
experience it, this may be referred to as “mindfulness” (Suler, n.d.e). The
photographs are no longer taken but offered to the photographer. Mindfulness in
photography becomes therapeutic because it provides a greater awareness of the
world, the self, and how they interact.
PhotoTherapy

Insight can be achieved through many techniques in therapy, one of which is through phototherapy. Phototherapy is the use of photographs in any form during psychotherapy. Dr. Hugh Diamond first documented phototherapy in 1856 only twenty years after the invention of photography (Prosser & Cronin, 1998). However, Judy Weiser is perhaps the most well known psychotherapist who has integrated photography into clinical work (Weiser, 1993). Soon after, her work and that of other like-minded psychotherapists such as Dr. David Krauss (Weiser, n.d.) and Dr. John Suler (Suler, n.d.c) began to be published; networks and symposiums were being held both in North America and internationally on the topic of Phototherapy.

Creating, viewing, or sharing photographs within therapy generates a new way to communicate. While verbal language is still the most common way in which we communicate our inner thoughts and feelings to others and sometimes to ourselves, words are simply representations of reality. Not all experiences or feelings are capable of being translated and accurately expressed. It is when these experiences and feelings are forced through translation that breaks and barriers are established. In contrast, a photograph is an actual depiction of an experience or feeling that is not suppressed by the perimeters of language. Judy Weiser states that photographs “...have the power to capture and express feelings and ideas in visual-symbolic forms, some of which are intimately personal metaphors.” (Weiser, 1999, p. 6).

The ability for a photograph to communicate so much is due to the way people typically respond to photographs. When a person looks at a photograph they
are taken to that place, at that moment. The interest is often the various meanings or emotions that are projected, sometimes subconsciously onto a photograph by the viewer. Because the viewer is seeing the photograph in real time, any emotions would also be present. It is this response to a visual “fact” of a moment of time; discussed in a PhotoTherapy group on Facebook, that phototherapy utilizes.

**Techniques Used in PhotoTherapy**

There are many techniques of PhotoTherapy; whether it’s through creating, viewing, or sharing and talking about photographs. These techniques among others all assist in the process of therapy. Photographs often express emotions and thoughts that otherwise a client may be unable to communicate to their therapist, or may still reside in their unconscious. The majority of techniques used in PhotoTherapy are to utilize those aspects of photographs. One of the most notable pioneers, Judy Weiser (Weiser, 1999), attributes five techniques in the practice of Phototherapy:

1. Exploring the client’s reaction to any photograph; the projective process
2. Discussing self-portraits by the client
3. Working with photos of the client taken by other people
4. Understanding the personal meaning of any photo the client has taken or saved
5. Discussing the client’s personal family albums or autobiographical photos

The projective process that occurs in all five of these techniques “deals with the ways and reasons that a person gets any meaning from any photograph in the
first place” (Weiser, 1999, p. 13). There are photo-projective situations, in which the client discovers personal meanings and memories while viewing any photograph. Similar to the variety of traditional projective tests such as the Rorschach inkblot test, the photograph becomes a stimulus that elicits emotional and cognitive responses from the client. It is these responses to the photograph or photographs that become a starting point for therapy.

The photographs used may either be selected by the therapist for a particular reason or selected by the client out of the therapist’s collection. By using photographs that are selected by the therapist, a particular emotion, area of the client’s life, or issue may be brought up. Maintaining a focus on the photographs enables clients to discuss their responses in an objective manner; this technique is a way to give attention to matters that the client is otherwise uncomfortable with in an impersonal and non-intrusive manner. When using photographs that were selected by the client, the therapist should concern themselves less with the content of the photograph and more with the “why” it was selected and the responses it stimulates within the client. There is often conscious and unconscious reasoning behind a client’s selections and these may serve as valuable aspects that should be addressed.

Working with self-portraits by the client is a technique that uses any style of photograph or photographs that deal with the self-perception of one’s self. This self-perception is a good practice of self-presentation and may be an actual representation, a metaphoric representation, or any combination of the two. In practice self-portraits may be self initiated by the client, made under the supervision
of the therapist, or even assigned as homework. The focus also has different variations. Dr. John Suler (Suler, 2009b) suggests that self-portraits may be a way in which the photographer attempts to illustrate a specific aspect of the self. He continues to explain that because most photographers are not consciously aware of all aspects of their personality that their photograph reveals, the more the photograph is studied the more they might understand. Through utilization of this therapy may come from discussing the planning and act of taking the self-portrait or working with and talking about the self-portraits.

A common issue that is addressed in psychotherapy is that of personal insight, the understanding of one’s self. Through planning, creating, viewing, and working with these self-portrait representations the client is able to explore himself or herself as well as assist in the conversation about the way in which they may view themselves. By doing so, the client is improving their understanding of themselves and could result in raising their self-esteem and self-confidence. Another area that self-portraits have strong success is with disempowered people such as some abuse survivors. The ability to communicate through non-verbal information gives these clients a voice. Due to the fact that these photographs were created by the client and document these new discoveries, the photograph becomes a form of proof for them.

Along the same lines as self-portraits, another technique involves working with photographs of a client taken by other people. Photographs of the clients taken by other people are usually spontaneous or at a point where the subject has little to no control over the outcome. They involve those photographs that were made for other people’s reasons rather than the client’s; these photographs show the client
through the interpretation of others.

People often forget that a photograph is an image of a single moment that was seen through another person’s eyes, another person’s perception of that moment. A person will usually view a photograph of their self and believe that perception to be who they are. Any aspect of the photograph that they are displeased with would then be taken as a personal fault. However this self-criticism has the ability to be approached as a reference to become more self-aware of how that photographer perceives them, a chance at an outside view of themselves. Judy Weiser states

“How we think we are seen is usually very different from how others see us.” (Weiser, 1999, p. 189). Photographs of the client taken by another person often reveal the characteristics of the client that are valued by the photographer as well as how the photographer feels about their relationship with the client. These situations may be used therapeutically to discover personal insight or as tools for work on communication and relationships.

The settings as well as any object or person included in a photograph also brings to surface various unconscious knowledge; an ability that becomes greater when patterns or a repeating theme are present. Background settings, emotional affect, body language, as well as accidental and unaware inclusions or exclusions are some of these elements that will stay present in a photograph even if they were unconsciously tuned out at the moment it was taken. These elements regardless of how inconspicuous often possess some form of significance or foster an emotion or memory. In regards to particular parts of the photographer that are hidden or
revealed often reflect their positive or negative feelings about that aspect of their body (Suler, 2009c). A client could search for better knowledge and understanding by discussing these aspects and the topics that they lead to.

Photographs of the client taken by another person over time are useful to show transitions. Much like the before and after photographs on any weight-loss commercial, photographs of clients throughout the process of therapy can show visual proof of their progress and other times of deterioration, such as might result from problems with body image or addiction. By seeing and being able to physically hold proof of either their progression or digression, clients may be more likely to accept a problem and work towards improvement. Photographs that have been taken and collected over time have also been used as coping strategies for those who are terminally ill as well as their loved ones while mourning. Used by an individual as a way to escape back to a time or place before they began to face mortality, or by family and friends as memories of time spent together, these photographs help those affected by death and dying.

Photographs that are taken by or even selected by the client, whether or not they are part of an assignment, are each a form of self-expression. This technique uses these photographs because they were created or selected for a reason; that reason contains important psychological and emotional information about the person. Hopes, dreams, ideas, values, emotions, as well as triumphs or strife are often captured in photographs. In essence, photographs may be seen as a microcosm of a person’s life. They become representations of a specific dimension in their life, conscious or unconscious mine, or even of themselves in entirety.
Photographs taken by the client become a way to allow the client to inform themselves about themselves in a physical manifestation. Spontaneous photography is very freeing and the resulting photographs will reflect the photographer; however, the creation of these photographs may also be done as part of an assignment. A therapist can assign themes or questions for a client to address while taking their photographs. The possibilities are infinite. They can be as simple as taking photographs of people and items that are valued or an instruction as specific as a photograph that shows “The me I would be if I weren’t being the me I am now.” (Weiser, 1999, p. 180).

Ansel Adams (Adams, n.d.) is quoted saying, “You don’t take a photograph, you make it.” The “act” of photography is never simply an action; with every close of the shutter the person behind the lens is creating a metaphor of some element of himself or herself. As a result the ability for later analysis and possible therapy is created in the form of a photograph.

Judy Weiser’s final technique category involves the use of family albums and other autobiographical photographs. Family albums or any photographs that the client has saved show who and what is valued in the client’s world and may create a story of the clients past as well as current lifestyle. These collections are made up of photographs that were consciously saved with the intentions of being kept forever. More recently, the use of online social networks such as Facebook and Flickr has become a modern, technological way to post and create albums and therefore may also be used therapeutically. While the previous four techniques generally address the client’s examination of the self, working with family albums and other
autobiographical photographs addresses the world throughout generations that relates both directly and indirectly to the client.

Any photograph that involves the client, including those that the client was the photographer can be examined for insight into the client’s role in both their family and any relationship that is portrayed. Because family albums are generally created over time and include meaningful photographs they are a wonderful source for observing the interrelationships of a person’s world as well as how they may have changed. If the time of onset of the client’s presenting problem is known, the timeline created by a personal album may contain information related to possible contributors or a better understanding of its development.

The photographs that the client is not involved in may still relate to them indirectly. Photographs such as these document the history, beliefs, and values of a family and its members, some of which may span generations. A better understanding of the world that surrounded a client throughout their life is often a valuable addition during therapy. However, the individual who decides which photographs are to be included in an album must be considered. While the album relates to all those who are included, the greatest reflection is that of the individual whom selects which photographs are to be included and which photographs will not.

The way in which the photographs are organized and presented might also be considered significant and contribute information through this form of self-portraiture (Weiser, 1999, p. 24). As previously stated, the greatest reflection is that of the individual who created the album. This individual controls either consciously
or unconsciously the way the album will be presented. If viewing an album not created by the client, discussing ways in which they would change the album or specific photographs is often beneficial.

A famous quote says, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” Through photographs and the reactions that they invoke in people, therapists are able to approach their clients’ needs from an entirely different angle, often discovering underlying thoughts and feelings.

**Aspects of a photograph that reflect personality and lifestyle**

In his book “Photoanalysis”, Dr. Robert U. Akeret (Akeret, 1973) says “It’s all there in the photo”. While this may be true it is important to understand what elements are comprised within a photograph. Composition is combining parts or elements to form a whole; it is the way in which a final product is created through the use of individual parts. There are no fixed rules in photography; however, there are various elements that are present in most if not all photographs. The elements that will be discussed are:

1. **Organization (composition)**
2. **Lines and shapes (particularly circles and triangles)**
3. **Negative space**
4. **Lighting and color**
5. **Focal point/s**

Organization refers to the inclusion, exclusion, and spatial relationships between elements involved in a photograph. The more obvious relationships in photographs are between any people that are in the image although within some
photographs an item may be identified as a symbolic representation of another person. These relationships are primarily structured through body language but the spatial relationship between subjects also offers a reflection of the interpersonal relation; in the case of the organization between items or a person and an item the reflection is more often intrapersonal.

The second element of a photograph's composition is lines. One of the most basic visual elements, a line may be thought of as any anomaly in a photograph or image that may guide the observer's eye, create a connection between items, or create a boundary or separation. When a line creates a direction in which the photograph is observed this may signify the photographer’s priorities. The conscious or unconscious creation of a story from the past, present or future could also be considered (Akeret, 1973, p. 20). A connection or separation between two items or spaces created by a line often illustrates a relationship between items, their significance or what they may symbolize. The connections in the photograph may relate to their relationships in life. When the pattern of strong connections in photographs is present it may reflect the photographer’s strong value of relationships or a nurturing and caring personality.

In a photograph the area surrounding and between subjects is known as negative space, sometimes referred to as the background. Negative space includes all areas of a photograph that are not necessarily empty, but simply not filled by the subject of focus; the area filled by the subject of focus is known as positive space. Negative space does not imply that it should be overlooked, in some cases it is a shape or the interaction between the negative and positive space that can offer the
most insight. When an object or person is framed by negative space it may be that this person or object plays an important role in the photographers life. The amount of negative space may also relate to the personality or lifestyle of the photographer. When there is little or no negative space the photograph seems cluttered and busy which may be similar to the way the photographer views their life; the need to make every second matter and to waste nothing.

A difference in the lighting and color of a photograph communicates different moods and emotions. In a study on colors and mood-tones (Murray & Deabler, 1957), correlations between certain colors and mood tones were found. If these findings are applied to photographs, then the photographer is given another element of their photograph that they could alter in accordance with the mood that they are conveying. Common relations between colors and mood consist of red and anger or passion, blue and depression or calmness, and yellow with joy or energy.

The type of photograph may also reflect the personality and lifestyle of a person. The two main categories include color and black & white. Ted Grant is credited with saying “When you photograph people in colour you photograph their clothes. But when you photograph people in B&W, you photograph their souls!” (Grant, n.d.). Many people have similar feelings in response to this nostalgic style of photography; now with the infinite styles of presenting a photograph, the type of photograph is able to better represent its creator.

Lighting plays an important role in photography and is often utilized to change how the final photograph turns out. Lighting includes both highlights and shadows caused by either a natural or artificial source, in some cases both are
applied. Highlights bring attention to areas of a photograph that may otherwise be overlooked whereas shadows tend to negate attention. However, when a majority of a photograph is light the effects of highlights and shadows alternate. Closely related to contrast, high-key and low-key photographs utilize lighting techniques or post-processing tools to take the concept of contrast to an extreme. High-key photographs are done by setting exposure levels very high, making the photograph very bright with little contrast. The mood of these photographs are generally happy, joyful, and sometimes mystical or mysterious. Low-key photographs on the other hand have a much darker tone and the dominant color is often black. There are many dark areas of the photograph with highlights drawing attention to specific features. Low-key photographs convey a darker mood sometimes creating a feeling of drama, anxiety, or tension.

Each of the previous four components of a photograph’s composition has the ability to create a focal point. A focal point is simply the area of the photograph that instantly draws the attention of the person viewing the photograph. This characteristic often causes the viewer to only focus on the focal point instead of it only being a starting point. The other aspects of the photograph and the ways that they interact are often just as revealing. In some cases the focal point is created unconsciously but generally there is a conscious effort while taking the shot or in post processing to create a focal point. When a specific object such as a favorite stuffed animal or individual such as a loved one is the focal point it would prove useful to understand its relationship with the photographer and then use that as a guide to discover the entire photograph. When the focal point of a photograph of a
group is one specific person, the relationship of this person to the photographer may be stronger than the relationships with the other people in the photograph. Another example is in a self-portrait; when the focus of the shot is a specific body part, the photograph may relate to the individuals opinion. They may exemplify parts of their body that they find attractive and hide or cover parts that they dislike. Bodies and the way they are positioned offer a great deal of information about the subject in a photograph.

Body language helps in the process of communication. At times it tells more than words ever could. Many forms of psychotherapy encourage addressing the client’s body language; often focusing on the overall posture, the limbs, or the hands and face of the client. The main difference between these and the body language in photographs is the depth in which body language may be analyzed. Photographs have the ability to capture facial and body expressions and saves them for later analysis. The permanent nature of a photograph encourages there to be less focus on the interpretations of the therapist, allowing the client to observe their own body language and offer their own interpretations.

While a single body posture element may help direct the conversation, the therapist should prioritize “message clusters” over individual gestures; according to the website Changingminds.org “Recognizing a whole cluster is thus far more reliable than trying to interpret individual elements.” (Using Body Language, n.d.). Message clusters are simply a grouping of body language patterns that each portrays a similar message. Observing body language and message clusters within a photograph may assist in understanding the internal emotion or mental state of the
subject, subjects, or between subjects. When the body language elements in a photograph appear to be contradictory, conflicting or ambivalent feelings within the person may be represented.

**How online photosharing can be therapeutic**

Through the use of the Internet, the therapeutic aspects of sharing and discussing a photograph with others may now be done in the familiarity and comfort of cyberspace, often through photo-sharing websites. To use many of these photo-sharing websites it is required that an individual create an account. Through that account a user is then able to interact with others in regard to their own images or someone else’s. These interactions can be organized into three categories of interaction: image, word, and action (Suler, 2008).

Every time a person uploads a photograph they are sharing more than just an image; in essence they are sharing a piece of themselves, their personality, relationships, and lifestyle (Suler, 2008, p. 556). However the representation that the image conveys does not necessarily have to be of the present self. The image may represent the past self or a specific aspect of himself or herself from the past. The representation may not even be of the self past or present, but of the idealized or feared self. These images can be a way of testing the waters of a certain change. Some expressions may be less threatening through an image posted online than in reality if it is a representation of the individual in a way their peers may not embrace. After sharing this representation of themself online, sharing with others in reality may be seen as less daunting.
Written language is often used in online photosharing. By creating a title and writing a description, whoever posted a particular image may guide the view in which their image is seen. The title may simply state what the image depicts, such as Charles C. Ebbets’ 1932 photograph “Lunch atop a Skyscraper”. However, the photographer to “set the scene” may use the title. In the 1905 photograph “An Oasis in the Badlands” an Oglala Sioux known as Red Hawk is sitting atop of his horse. During this time period Native Americans were seen as little more than savages. Edward S. Curtis’ title strengthens the dignified depiction of Red Hawk and offers the idea that these people are not simply obstacles to cross (the Badlands) but a culture that should be embraced and valued (an oasis). In an online photosharing group it is not uncommon for someone to post a photograph and ask for suggestions for a title. With a discussion focused on possible titles, the different interpretations of the photograph begin to surface. A simple shot of a bridge to some may appear to be a journey; to others it represents an obstacle that they have overcome, and to some the focus of the shot may not be the bridge at all, but the water under the bridge.

Image descriptions take this communication process to another level. While still able to narrate their meanings and interpretations, image descriptions are a way to include a more in-depth personalization. Writing about any feelings, memories, fantasies, and associations that the image may bring to light and posting this can be a cathartic experience. This relationship can be seen in research published in APA’s Journal of Experimental Psychology. Klein and Boals show that
expressive writing reduces intrusive and avoidant thoughts about negative events (Klein & Boals, 2001).

The image’s poster is not the only one that is able to write about the image. The ability to comment on another’s image is another way in which written interactions occur in photo-sharing communities. These comments may be simple compliments, critiques and technical remarks, personal reactions, interpretations of the photographer, topical comments, or questions (Suler, 2008, p. 559). A benefit of written interactions over simply socializing is the ability to think about and rearrange your thoughts in the way you wish to present them. Before posting a comment you can read over what you wrote, include or exclude parts and better clarify what you are communicating. Therapeutically, written interaction unlike socializing offers the chance to reread comments at any time. Rereading comments might reaffirm beliefs or confidence in relationships. This written language is one of the main tools used to communicate thoughts about an image, however some times actions speak louder than words.

When someone views another person’s image there is the option to either rate the image or add it to their favorites; a list of images that a person considers to be their favorites. There are many reasons why a person may consider an image as one of their favorites. The obvious explanation would be that the image is simply visually pleasing, but an image may also be psychologically pleasing. This may be in the form of a strong emotion or opinion. The action of adding an image as a favorite might have nothing to do with the image at all; it may be a gesture of friendship. Finally, because any image that a person selects as a favorite is saved, adding an
image to their favorites is a way for that person to return to that image in the future; making it something important to them. Having someone add one of your own photographs as a favorite may be therapeutic for some. They may feel a connection to this person or supported and encouraged. The process of giving a favorite may also become therapeutic. If the particular photograph prompted a positive emotion adding the photograph as a favorite not only shows thanks to the poster but also saves the photograph for the viewer to return to if they wish to revisit the emotion.

On some websites, such as Flickr (Flickr, 2004), users are also able to join public or private groups. The definition of a group is highly controversial and rarely agreed upon. In this situation a group is defined as a collection of individuals who have decided to declare themselves members of a group that has a declared theme and whose interactions in some capacity relate to an image or images. Groups can be formed around an infinite number of themes. Thousands of these groups consist of themes related to mental health issues, over eight hundred devoted to depression alone. These groups offer an opportunity for people to connect and discuss not only their photography but also their experiences.

The environment and the interactions between members often resemble those of traditional self-help/support groups with the addition of images. The therapeutic effect of photosharing groups may be best compared to that of a self-help group which has a focus on overcoming or coping with life stresses (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Posting photographs and then discussing them with others allows a person to self-disclose and receive feedback on their images and comments. Because of the vulnerability that some people subject themselves to in photosharing groups,
negative feedback or personal attacks may occur and be detrimental. In addition to this, within the photosharing group there may be people who try to provide “therapy” who are not licensed or even trained to do so. Although the therapeutic effects of some of these groups may be questionable, many provide a setting where a person can participate in some form of therapeutic photography.

The use of conscious and unconscious photographs may be productive in discovering the areas of life in which one can find personal insight. Through this study I intend to support this hypothesis and understand a productive way in which to aid in the assistance of psychotherapy and in finding personal insight. I will demonstrate the significance of photographs that the participant remembers taking (conscious) in contrast to the photographs that the client doesn’t remember taking or has forgotten (unconscious), the possible therapeutic aspects of this exercise (e.g. doing, thinking, and talking about their photography) and how the information gathered from a client while doing this exercise could be utilized in their overall therapy.

**METHODS**

Seven participants were recruited randomly with an age range of 19 to 23 years. Five participants were female and two participants were male. All of the participants were enrolled at Rider University and declared psychology as either a major or minor. One of the participants may be described as being advanced in their experience with photography while the remaining six may be described as average to slightly above average.
The prospective participant was given an informed consent statement form (see appendix 1) and had the content of the form explained to them. The consent form elaborated that information gathered from their participation may be used in an Independent Study for the Psychology Department at Rider University, under the supervision of Dr. John Suler. Additionally, anything that was mentioned during the interview may be included in the paper, excluding any information that could be used to identify them. They were also informed that at any point they may skip a question during the interview or in the Quality of Life Scale, or withdraw from the study. The participant was then given a film camera with a minimum of twenty-four (24) exposures as well as the ability to use a flash, and instructed that they had twenty-four (24) hours to take photographs with the instructions to “Take photographs of anything you find interesting, or that feels important to you and/or your life”. The participant was also instructed that they must use all (24) of the exposures. The participant was given a copy of the informed consent statement form to be used as a reference to remind them of their instructions for shooting.

Upon completion of taking their photographs the participant returned the camera to the researcher and were given the Quality of Life Scale (QOLS) assessment (see appendix 2). The QOLS is an assessment in which the participant rates their quality of life in each of the sixteen (16) specific areas of life; on an ordinal scale between delighted (7) and terrible (1). The QOLS assessment was chosen for its simplicity of application and used to show ordinal changes of the self reported quality in different areas of the participant’s life. These changes, either positive or negative, indicate personal insight in the specified areas and will lead to areas that
may be beneficial in further exploration during therapy. To take the QOLS assessment the participants were read the following instructions, which were also written on the top of each assessment. “Please read each item and circle the number that best describes how satisfied you are at this time. Please answer each item even if you do not currently participate in an activity or have a relationship. You can be satisfied or dissatisfied with not doing the activity or having the relationship.” Each assessment was scored individually by summing the items to make a total score. For any missing data the mean score of mixed was inserted.

Seven days after the participant took their photographs the participant was instructed to describe each of the photographs that they had recalled taking. These descriptions were given orally and recorded with an audio device. The participant was then given copies of the photographs that they had previously recalled and allowed five minutes to look over the photographs. This was followed by a structured interview that was given orally and recorded with an audio device and involved all of the following questions in order.

1. What thoughts and feelings immediately come to mind about these photos?
2. What does this image remind you of?
3. If you could retake this photograph, would you change anything about it? Would you still take the photograph?
4. If this photograph could speak, what would it tell or ask you? Would it tell or ask me something different?
5. What were you thinking and what was happening when you took this photograph?
6. What would you like to do with this photograph if you could do anything? (e.g. hide it, display it, rip it up, throw it out, save it somewhere)

7. What, if, anything is missing from this photo? (If the photo is incomplete, what is needed in order to complete it?)

8. Looking at this photograph now could this photograph have been taken for someone?

9. What are three ways that this photograph connects to you as a person? What are three ways that this photograph is opposite to you as a person?

10. What mood would you describe this photograph as?

11. Do you notice any patterns or connections between photographs?

12. How would you divide your photographs if you had to divide them into groups? What would those groups be?

13. What color crayons would you use if you could recolor your photograph?

14. If you were asked to place yourself into the photograph, what pose would you use and where in the photograph would you be? What would you be wearing? What would you be feeling, thinking, and doing?

The participant was then given their remaining photographs; the photographs that they had not recalled taking, and allowed five (5) minutes to look over these photographs. This was followed by a structured interview that was given orally and recorded with an audio device and involved all of the following questions in order.

1. What thoughts and feelings immediately come to mind about these photos?
2. What does this image remind you of?

3. If you could retake this photograph, would you change anything about it? Would you still take the photograph?

4. If this photograph could speak, what would it tell or ask you? Would it tell or ask me something different?

5. What were you thinking and what was happening when you took this photograph?

6. What would you like to do with this photograph if you could do anything? (e.g. hide it, display it, rip it up, throw it out, save it somewhere)

7. What, if, anything is missing from this photo? (If the photo is incomplete, what is needed in order to complete it?)

8. Looking at this photograph now could this photograph have been taken for someone?

9. What are three ways that this photograph connects to you as a person? What are three ways that this photograph is opposite to you as a person?

10. What mood would you describe this photograph as?

11. Do you notice any patterns or connections between photographs?

12. How would you divide your photographs if you had to divide them into groups? What would those groups be?

13. What color crayons would you use if you could recolor your photograph?
14. If you were asked to place yourself into the photograph, what pose would you use and where in the photograph would you be? What would you be wearing? What would you be feeling, thinking, and doing?

The subjects were also asked why they thought they remembered taking some of the photographs, but not the others.

A second QOLS assessment was then given to measure any ordinal changes that had occurred. To take the QOLS assessment the participants were read the following instructions, which were also written on the top of each assessment. “Please read each item and circle the number that best describes how satisfied you are at this time. Please answer each item even if you do not currently participate in an activity or have a relationship. You can be satisfied or dissatisfied with not doing the activity or having the relationship.” Each assessment was scored individually by summing the items to make a total score. For any missing data the mean score of mixed(4) was inserted. The two assessment scores were then compared and analyzed after which the participant was asked about any changes that had occurred.

**Discussion**

The reaction to the reviewing of photographs and the symbols within them is well described by Dr. John Suler (Suler, 2009). He explains that “Closer to the language of primary process thinking, as in dreams and fantasy, visual images convey underlying thoughts, memories, and emotions while bypassing ego defenses”. This insight is the ability embedded within viewing photographs and the processes of creating and post-processing photographs. Additionally we may
separate photographs that are created by the client into two distinct categories, conscious and unconscious photographs.

    Conscious photographs are photographs the photographer has the ability to recall taking and in some cases able to describe in detail. The conscious photographs were typically premeditated shots; the photographer may have arranged the objects seen in the photograph or consciously considered the influence a specific aspect may have on the final composition of the photograph. This understanding of conscious photographs was discovered through observed patterns seen in the photographs by the participants involved in this study (e.g. arranging stuffed animals or friends and turning on the flash in darker settings opposed to taking the shot without the flash resulting in a distorted shot).

    While all photographs have a purpose behind their creation, the photographer often knows the purpose in the case of these photographs. Within the study the purposes behind conscious photographs were often described as “I took this shot because this is my favorite...” or “I took this shot because this is an important part of my life.” However, while a majority of conscious photographs are these premeditated shots, photographs that are a result of a “decisive moment” when something visually and/or emotionally exciting catches the attention of the photographer are often remembered. These photographs weren’t planned or necessarily taken for a specific purpose, possibly because the unconscious mind was that which chose the shot for its meaning and emotion. The reasoning behind why these photographs are often remembered is likely due to the fact that things attached to emotion are better remembered than those that are not. Although these
photographs are remembered, all the ideas and feelings involved in taking the shot may not be consciously understood or even known. This brings up the topic of repression or suppression in photographs.

Dr. Simon Boag or Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia explains that repression and suppression “…are said to involve removing mental content from awareness. However, repression is generally said to be unconscious, whereas suppression is said to be conscious.” (Boag, 2010, p. 164). In the situation of this study, there was a span of seven days between the times the participants took the photographs and being asked to recall them. During this time, the participants may have unconsciously repressed photographs that they had taken due to the memories or emotions that were related to them. These photographs then become known as “unconscious photographs”.

Unconscious photographs are photographs the photographer is unable to recall taking. These are often the result of a more spontaneous shot, such as a shot of the front door of your house that was taken as you walked to your car. Unlike decisive moments shots, which commonly involve a nice composition, beautiful colors, or other positive aesthetics, unconscious photographs would usually involve the excitement and emotion of a “perfect” and personally meaningful and emotional shot emerging before the photographer’s eyes. This spontaneity allows the unconscious of the photographer to control the aspects within the photograph. Through photography, the photographer; as explained by Aniela Jaffé in Carl G. Jung’s book *Man and His Symbols* (Jung, C. G., Franz, M., & Jaffe, A., 1964, p. 257), “…unconsciously transforms objects or forms into symbols (thereby endowing them
with great psychological importance) and expresses them in both his religion and his visual art.” There must be a distinction here between photographs that are “not remembered” and photographs that are “forgotten”. Photographs that are forgotten might consist of photographs that are simply unimportant, where as photographs which are not remembered may have held importance at one time and was “repressed”. The critical factor here may be whether an emotion or memory was related to the photograph or at the time of the photograph.

In the study it was also found that the unconscious, or forgotten photographs, tended to relate to negative areas of the individuals life. The conscious, or remembered photographs pertained to the more positive areas of their life. In a few cases a conscious photograph symbolized a remedy or the way the individual addresses an issue in their life that was also symbolized by an unconscious photograph.

Participant 1 suffers from a chronic pain that in some cases creates a need for a wheelchair. During the time of this research participant 1 was experiencing complications with their medication and she was experiencing an increase of pain. The conscious photographs reflected some of the participant’s techniques for coping with this. When asked question five, “What were you thinking and what was happening when you took this photograph?” the participant replied to a photograph of the sky “when I’m upset I like to be outside and look at the clouds. So it was calming to me.” The participant also referred to this photograph of the sky mentioning that they would “hang it up” as an answer to question six, “What would you like to do with this photograph if you could do anything? (e.g. hide it, display it,
rip it up, throw it out, save it somewhere). By choosing to hang this photograph up, the participant shows a desire to remember the photograph and most likely the calming feeling that it creates.

In participant 1’s unconscious photographs there were two photographs that related to their desire to be calm. The first, a photograph of a girl with her head down and sleeping at a table was mentioned in response to two questions. When asked question two “What does this image remind you of?”, the participant replied that it reminded them of being tired. As patterns are important in any projective assessment it should be mentioned that in response to question nine, “What are three ways this photograph connects to you as a person? What are three ways that this photograph is opposite to you as a person?”, the participant replied “Tired, it connects to me because I was tired, gloomy, and worn out.” to the same photograph of a girl with her head down and sleeping at a table. Additionally, in response to question fourteen, “If you were asked to place yourself into the photograph, what pose would you use and where in the photograph would you be? What would you be wearing? What would you be feeling, thinking, and doing?” the participant referred to a photograph of a pillow and said “I’d be laying down with my head on the pillow, probably wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt and I would just be relaxed.” We see in the response to this question the wish for the remedy that appeared in the conscious photo. These findings positively correlated with data from the Quality of Life Scale (QOLS). Participant 1 showed a rating drop from seven (delighted) to five (mostly satisfied) in the area of “Learning- attending school, improving understanding, getting additional knowledge”. This change in addition to a rating
drop of one (1) in the areas of “Understanding yourself- knowing your assets and limitations- knowing what life is about”, “Participating in active recreation”, and “Independence, doing for yourself” may reflect the findings discussed earlier.

The desire for relaxation and calmness reflects finding by Dr. John Suler (Suler, n.d.f). In his research it was found that after viewing a slideshow of 200 images, the most common reaction from students concerning these images was a desire for a state of “peacefulness, joy, contentment, love, relaxation, comfort, security, oneness, rejuvenation, synchronization, immersion, and pure tranquility”.

The differentiation between the positive areas of life portrayed in the conscious photographs and the negative areas of life portrayed in the unconscious photographs were a common theme. Other examples of this were seen in participant 4. Participant 4’s conscious photographs included photos of her grandmother, brother, boyfriend and the stuffed animals that he had given to her. The people in these photographs are those that the participant has close and loving relationships with, which offer her support. When question two “What does this image remind you of?” was asked about participant 4’s unconscious photographs there were four photographs that were included in her answer. The photographs were of an old roommate and herself, an autism volunteer button, a framed photo of her and her grandmother at her graduation, and her house. The photograph of the participant and her old roommate reminded her of her old roommate, who “…was my (participant 4) best friend, then she moved, went to another school.” The photograph of the autism volunteer button brought back memories of the difficulties her brother faces. The photograph of a framed photograph of her and her
grandmother at her graduation brought back negative emotions and was stated that graduation “...usually would be a happy time, but it wasn't for me.” Finally, the participant claimed to have “mixed feelings” about the photograph of her house. These are four additional examples of how conscious photographs containing positive and unconscious photographs containing negative areas of life is a common theme.

However, in some cases when a negative area of life was recently improved, any photographs reflecting this area of life were observed in the conscious photographs. This was most clearly observed in information collected from participant 7.

Participant 7 recently ended a relationship with a partner who was in and out of rehab for drugs. During the time of this research she was in the process of moving into a new living space separate from this person. One of participant 7's photographs portrayed her ex-boyfriend along with her two dogs. This photograph was selected in response to question three “If you could retake this photograph, would you change anything about it? Would you still take the photograph?” She replied that she would still take the photograph however she would change the fact that her ex-boyfriend was in the photograph. By removing him from the photograph, in a sense she was reflecting the act of removing him from her life. The data collected from the Quality of Life Scale(QOLS) mirrored this. Participant 7 showed a rating drop from seven (delighted) to two (unhappy) in “Close relationships with spouse or significant other” and an increase from four (mixed) to six (pleased) in “Independence, doing for yourself”. While the participant appears to be unhappy
with her current relationship status, she has increased quality of her independence, which may be attributed to her choice to put her own needs above the needs of others, an issue that was addressed in her photographs.

A realization of an aspect that contributes to the better understanding of life is an important part of many theories of psychotherapy. In the case of participant 2, the better understanding of their relationship with their parents and their role to others was addressed in their interview. Although participant 2 failed to utilize all twenty-four shots; a possible relation to the participant’s personality style or visual ability, which may have led to the outcome of every photograph being remembered, two of the photographs are related to the positive areas of life and furthermore provided insight and support the positive correlation between the Quality of Life Scale (QOLS) and the topics discussed in response to his photographs.

The first photograph, a photograph of his parents, was selected to answer two of the interview questions. When asked question three “If you could retake this photograph, would you change anything about it? Would you still take the photograph?” the participant explained that it was important to him to take a photograph of his parents. He answered that he would change the fact that they appeared tired from the long day and night that the three of them spent together, yet he couldn’t think of a better time to take the photograph. While the participant was not in the photograph, he had the desire to be. When asked question fourteen “If you were asked to place yourself into the photograph, what pose would you use and where in the photograph would you be? What would you be wearing? What would you be feeling, thinking, and doing?” the participant referred to the
photograph of his parents and stated "I would place myself in this photograph either behind or between my them (his parents). I would be wearing comfy clothes and either be hugging them or behind them doing something stupid." The photograph was taken while in Walt Disney World and although the participant said that “Disney is impersonal”, meaning that it provided fun but it wasn’t his kind of fun the fact that he placed himself in the photograph with his parents either hugging them or “doing something stupid” behind them may be a way of connecting to his childhood. This discussion might have contributed to the positive change from a rating of five (mostly satisfied) to six (pleased) in the area of “Relationships with parents, siblings & other relatives: communicating, visiting, helping”.

The second photograph was of the participant and two of his teammates that were new to the team. When discussing this photograph the participant mentioned that this was his final year on the team and that this photograph symbolized the relationship he has had with these two teammates. While the end of the season of his final year on the team may be seen as a negative area of life, the way in which the participant approached the issue should be seen as positive. In the “Helping and encouraging others, volunteering, giving advice” area of the Quality of Life Scale(QOLS), participant 2 showed an increase from five (mostly satisfied) to six (pleased). The possible contribution of this photograph to the change may be best explained by the participant’s answer of “passing the torch” when asked question one “What thoughts and feelings immediately come to mind about these photos?”. This positive approach of the issue of termination might relate to the participants personality in general. Additionally, it would be advantageous to state that one of
participant 2’s photographs; a reflection of Walt Disney World’s Spaceship Earth, elicited the feelings of being calm and serene as support for Dr. John Suler's findings as well as the previous discussion on conscious photographs relating to positive aspects of life.

Throughout the study there were photographs that were simply forgotten because they simply lacked any emotional attachment or memory. Some examples of this type of unconscious photograph that appeared in the study included, a participant’s shoes, cellphone, juice boxes, a fish tank, and headache pills. It should be noted that emotion or memories that create an emotion have been found to contribute to which photographs are remembered and which photographs are not remembered as well as forgotten.

**Conclusion**

In this study it was found that the unconscious photographs typically related to the negative areas on a person’s life while the conscious photographs typically related to the positive or desires for relaxation and calmness. Furthermore, the positive areas of life portrayed in conscious photographs might represent the way in which the individual copes with a negative area of life portrayed in the unconscious photographs. The conscious photographs might also reflect negative areas of life that were recently improved or addressed. Finally, the understanding between forgotten photographs and non-remembered photographs was clarified.

The limitations of this study would be the instruction set to take shots of “anything that you find interesting, or that feels important to you and your life.”,
which was included to increase the likelihood of the photographs involving emotion, which might make them remembered or repressed, depending on the negative or positive emotion elicited. If this instruction were not included the significance of the unconscious photographs as well as the relationship between the conscious and unconscious photographs might have diminished. The personality and lifestyle of the subject may be considered a variable. Whether the personality of the subject was introspective or not, psychologically sophisticated or not, and whether they were experiencing life difficulties or not may have contributed to the contents and emotions that were involved in their photographs.

Another factor that might influence the significance of unconscious photographs and the relationship between conscious and unconscious photographs is the introspective and photographic skill of the photographer. For those approaching photography from a purely artistic mindset both the conscious and unconscious would be significantly less therapeutic than someone approaching photography as a therapeutic tool such as in therapeutic photography.

The equipment and photograph processing was an additional limitation. It was found that an auto-focus film camera should be used over a disposable camera whenever possible. The emphasis on using the entire roll of film must be better communicated to the participants because low number of photographs diminishes the significance of the remembered photographs. Finally it must be understood that no statistical tests of significance were done on these QOLS scores.

The data and ideas discovered in this research may lead to follow up research that addresses the significance in the number of photographs taken related
to the therapeutic qualities of the conscious and unconscious photographs, reoccurring patterns or themes observed in unconscious photographs and in conscious photographs, and further applications of conscious and unconscious photographs.
Appendix 1
Informed Consent
The beneficial aspects of photography
Independent Study Project, Fall 2011
Adam Natoli
Psychology Department, Rider University

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research project. The purpose of the project is to understand how taking photographs and talking about them might be helpful to people as a way to understand themselves and their lives. I am doing the project as an Independent Study for the Psychology Department at Rider University, under the supervision of Dr. John Suler.

If you decide to participate, you will be given a disposable film camera consisting of 27 shots. Sometime during the next week, spend 30 to 90 minutes taking shots of anything you find interesting or that feels important to you and your life. Please let me know when you finish taking the shots so I can pick up the camera and have the film developed.

No longer than one week after you take the shots, we will meet to look at and talk about the photos. In this interview, which I will record, I will ask you to describe any thoughts, feelings, or memories that come to your mind about the photos.

At two points during the study, I will also ask you to fill out a Quality of Life Scale that asks you to rate how satisfied you feel about different aspects of your life, such as family relationships, job, hobbies, etc.

Please feel free to skip any question in the Quality of Life Scale or in the interview I will conduct with you after you take the photos. If at any time you decide that you would rather not participate in this study, please feel free to let me know and you can withdraw from the study at any time.

In the paper that I will write for this research, I may use quotations of things you said during the interview. Any information that could identify you will not appear in the paper or in any notes I might take during the study. At the end of my project, I will delete the interview recordings, and you may keep the photos.

If you have any questions at any time, feel free to ask me or Dr. Suler:
suler@rider.edu – 609-895-5430

Thanks again for your help with my project.

___________________________  _______________________
(your signature)              (date)
Appendix 2
Participant Number: ___________  Time Started: ______
Researcher: ______________________________
Date: ___ / ___ / ______

Please read each item and circle the number that best describes how satisfied you are at this time. Please answer each item even if you do not currently participate in an activity or have a relationship. You can be satisfied or dissatisfied with not doing the activity or having the relationship.

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<th>Pleased</th>
<th>Mostly Satisfied</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Mostly Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Unhappy</th>
<th>Terrible</th>
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References


