



Visual Literacy, Psychological Counseling and Phototherapy: A Model Application

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Abstract

Phototherapy is generally described as the use of photography, a visual image, for the communication in the process of therapy/counseling. The purpose of this study is to introduce the phototherapy technique as a method which will increase therapeutic communication in the process of psychological counseling and to present an example for training purposes based on the use of the technique.

The study was conducted in the phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research patterns. The study group was comprised of nine senior students who have been in the department of psychological counseling and guidance. The data were collected with the structured interview technique using photography. As a result of the application, it was observed that the use of photography enabled the initiation and deepening of communication among the group members. In respect to the meaning of the photos chosen, eight members of the study group have brought a photo with a positive meaning and one has brought a photo with a negative meaning. It was inspected that each participant clearly and thoroughly remembered the story of the photo he brought for the study and expressed that they had the same feeling at the moment. It was found that each member attributed a different meaning and created a different story for the same photo. The findings were discussed in the light of the literature and suggestions were made based on this.

Keywords

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Introduction

Visual Literacy and Photography

The people today are expected to understand themselves and others well. In order to fulfill this expectation, individuals are required to develop themselves in multiple dimensions and increase their competences. For the people of the modern age, where the production of knowledge is in the foreground, the ability to use all kinds of information is demanded. Using all kinds of information reveals the notion of multidimensional literacy concept. Visual literacy, specified by J. Debes (1969), is described as the individual's ability to distinguish and interpret the natural or human-made objects, symbols in his environment. (cited by Brill, Kim and Branch 2007). In the recent years, the studies related to brain focus on visual perception and seeing (Halkola, 2009). Weiser (1998) states that literacy is

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basically visual and it is based on a lot of other senses. According to Martin (2009), all therapeutic approaches stress the importance of visual language. From this perspective, photo, as a visual image, is a good communication tool that brings innovation in the classic counseling applications with its contribution to communication in the process (Weiser, 2004; Stevensa and Spearsa, 2009; Martin, 2009; Prins, 2013).

Psychological counseling, and Phototherapy

People encounter interpersonal and personal problems during their daily lives. In the description and solution of these problems, psychological counseling is come into play. According to Hackney and Cormier (2008), psychological counseling is defined as the Professional helping process offered to the individual in solving normal and developmental problems in the personal and interpersonal dimensions, in addition to his psychological conflicts.

Weiser (2004) defines phototherapy ~~in general~~ as the use of photos for communication in the therapy/counseling process. According to her, phototherapy is the use of photos and interaction with photos via integrating them with the techniques utilized in therapy/counseling process in their therapeutic applications executed internationally by the mental health professionals while offering counseling services to others. According to Weiser (1984), people apply to counseling when they cannot solve their problems utilizing their own resources and they would like to achieve growth, development, being better understood, feeling better, gaining self confidence (increasing self confidence) and the ability to communicate more openly and effectively with the other individuals. All of these are based on communication. For her, the communication made with the photo is different from the utterance said and it is much more than that. From this perspective, the photo used in phototherapy as a technique can be employed as an effective tool in understanding the client and his life story (Stevensa and Spearsa, 2009; Martin, 2009), understanding his interpersonal relationships (Yerushalmi and Yedidya, 2007), providing therapeutic communication and healing the counselee (Weiser, 1998, 2003; Halkola, 2009; Stevensa and Spearsa, 2009; Ginicola, Smitha and Trzaskab, 2012; Prinz, 2013) found alternative solution their problems (Ricksa, Kitchensa, Goodricha & Hancocka, 2014).

According to Weiser (2004), phototherapy, a technique relied on existential and phenomenological theories, is neither specific to the model nor a theory in itself. It is the techniques which will only be operated in order to prompt the theoretical assumptions in "How can I help people?". The use of photo in the counseling process is independent from the theoretical orientation of the psychological counselor. For Martin (2009), the communication can be prospered in not only the counseling circumstances but also in educational and working groups. In previous studies, it is emphasized that the photo undertakes the role of a canal in understanding how the individual perceives the world and attributes it to what kind of values in addition to his affects, thoughts and memories and the role of catalyst in therapeutic communication (Weiser, 1984; Koretsky, 2001; Martin, 2009). Prins (2013), in his studies, focuses on the fact that the photo increases the intimacy and sincerity, and rapport, the quality of trust between the counselor and the client. From this perspective, it is highlighted that therapeutic success in the use of the photo in the counseling process derives from this advanced communication.

In phototherapy applications, the first step is to bring the photo to the session (Weiser, 2007). The second step comprises of the emotions and thoughts rising from the look of the photo. In phototherapy sessions, The photos not only reflect the thought and the visible thing passively but also it proceeds the re-experiencing / re-visualizing the things in the imagination or in the memory "here and now" in the thoughts, affects and body (Prins, 2013) and telling new stories actively (Weiser, 2002). Information is obtained through photographic dialogue with the client based on the photo / album brought to the counseling environment and the helping process is continued, depending on the things revealed (Weiser, 2002; Martin, 2009). The primary role of the counselor in phototherapy is to support the client's self-exploration personally and to encourage him to do that (Weiser, 1984; Koretsky, 2001). The real meaning of any photo relies on the things triggered cognitively and emotionally besides its visual realities (Weiser, 1998; 2002; 2004; Koretsky, 2001; Prins, 2013).

According to Weiser (1998), each photo brought to the environment in a stage where psychological counseling is needed individually or within a group, expresses a situation which is special for the individual and where he defines himself. The photos provide information about the life of the client to the counselor. They present visual signs about how he is physically and he looks like and explicit and/or implicit symptoms about his emotional appearance (Weiser, 2004). Photos are the frozen state of a moment in people's lives. (Prins, 2013). When looked from the perspective of the client, the photos take the same role as a mirror in the memory. When the individual sees the photo, he remembers the events, memories and the people with characteristics related to that moment (Koretsky, 2001; Weiser, 2004). For people in all cultures, and at each socio-economic level, people take the photos valuable to themselves and save them. Most people have the photos of their own, and they have photos belonging to the people important in their lives or places with their subjective meaning. From this perspective, it is that photos can be used as a tool for the therapeutic discovery of people's life stories and their inner worlds (Weiser, 1998, 2003, 2004; Martin, 2009; Seifert, 2014).

In related literature in our country, no studies related to the use of the technique of phototherapy in psychological counseling applications or the publicity of the phototherapy technique have been spotted. From this perspective, the publicity of the technique and presenting an exemplary application are important. There are studies in the literature about phototherapy technique being used as a tool for education in study groups as well as a therapeutic tool (Martin, 2009; Seifert, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to introduce the technique of phototherapy that will increase therapeutic communication during the process of psychological counseling and to provide a model application for this technique to be used. In order to achieve this purpose, the answer to the following questions has been searched: 1. What is the meaning attributed to the photos brought to the counseling environment by the counselees? 2. What kind of emotions and memories do the photos brought by the client arise in the counselling? 3. Are there any differences in the meaning attributed to the same photo by different clients?

Method

The Research Model

In this study, a qualitative research method was chosen since it enabled the detailed analysis of how a certain situation has been experienced, and among these qualitative methods, a phenomenological approach was preferred. One of the main contributions of the phenomenological approach is figuring out how individuals experience and perceive the world (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005; Kuzu, 2011). Since the study material was the photo, the way each photo was perceived and interpreted would change from person to person.

Participants

The working group was chosen using the criterion sampling method (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz and Demirel, 2008). The criteria were that the group members participating in the study had the same level of knowledge, ability and experience about psychological counseling and that they volunteered to be in the training group. The study group was comprised of a group of nine senior students of the Guidance and Psychological Counseling Department, out of which seven were women and two were men.

Data Collection Tools and the Collection of Data

In the phenomenological method, the most frequently used method for data gathering is the interview technique. However, there are many ways for the individuals to express their lives. For this reason, group interviews, pictures, written answers and historical documents valid in all qualitative researches related to the different ways individuals perceive phenomena, are used as the main source of information in phenomenological studies (Kuzu, 2011.) In this study, a semi structured and face to face interview technique and a photo belonging to the counselee were used as tools for data collection.

In a training group with an ongoing education, the participants were asked to bring a photo belonging to them, which they would like to share to the next session. Martin (2009) stresses that phototherapy can be used in education and training groups and with semi structured questions information on how the clients perceive the world can be gathered. When the session started, the members sat in a circle and once the purpose of the session was explained, the application began. Since the study group was a training group, with the possible reservations in consideration, information was gathered using two semi structured forms (Form 1 and Form 2) which included the questions related to photographic dialogue. Form 1 included the questions; 1. *“Why did you choose this photo, does this photo have a special meaning for you?”* 2. *“What is the story of this photo?”* 3. *“What do you think of when you look at this photo?”* 4. *“Who has taken this photo?”* 5. *“Who is present in this photo?”* 6. *“Did you want this photo to be taken?”* 7. *“Where did you get this photo taken?”*. The filling of Form 1 lasted for 20 minutes approximately, and once the whole group is completed the form, they were asked permission to scan the photos, and the members who have granted the permission were asked to put the photos with their filled forms into the envelope.

In the second step, it was asked whether any of the members would like to share his photo with the group and one member (Member 9) was willing to do so. This time, Form 2 was distributed to the members and the members were asked to fill in the form about the photo of the volunteer member. The questions on Form 2 were listed (as generalized and reduced), 1. *“What comes to your mind when you look at this photo?”* 2. *“What can be the story of this photo?”* 3. *“What would you like to change in this photo?”* The filling of this form lasted for approximately 15 minutes.

In the third stage of data collection, an application aimed at enriching therapeutic communication about his photo with a volunteer member in the group. Before the therapeutic communication was started, the photo of the volunteer member and the data in Form 1 were examined, and photographic dialogue was begun after this. Since the study group was a training group, in order to protect the privacy of the member, the dialogue was not deepened extensively; it was only presented as a model. After these applications, technical information about phototherapy and the use of photo in counseling was given and this information was matched with the application made and the session was summarized and concluded. All of them lasted for about 90 minutes.

Analysis of the Data

After the session was completed, together with the photos belonging to the group members, the things written on Form 1 were read. Since the first three questions on the form related to “why?” had a more therapeutic and emotionally open quality, the answers given to these questions were especially studied. Firstly, the answers given to the question *“Why did you choose this photo, does this photo have a special meaning for you?”* was examined considering two themes (photos related to positive memories and emotions, photos related to negative memories and emotions) and coded accordingly. Then, the statements of each member related to the questions *“What is the story of this story?”* and *“What comes to your mind when you look at this photo?”* were examined and the emotions stressed were coded as themes and their frequencies were identified.

The studies on Form 2 were conducted on eight members. The answers given by the member who volunteered to share the photo with the group (Member 9) in Form 1 was evaluated together with the answers given by the other eight members on Form 2. As a result, for the questions *“What do you think of when you look at this photo? What can the story of this photo be? What would you like to change about this photo?”* in Form 2, the answers of the members who were not the owners of the photo were examined and the answers and meaning of each member gave to the photo and the meaning attributed by the member who shared his photo were compared.

Findings

The findings were presented in the order of the research questions. Firstly, the findings related to the photo each member has brought were tackled, and secondly, the meaning attributed by the sharing member (SM) and other members to the photo were tackled:

1. The Findings Related to the Meaning the Members Attributed to the Photo They Brought to the Group (Form 1) the example statements from the answers of the group members gave to the question “*Why did you choose this photo? Does this photo have a special meaning for you?*” were presented below.

M1’s photo: (In the woods covered with snow, a snowman has been built; the member and his mother are standing two small girls with snowballs in their hands, posing).

In the photo, my mother, my sisters and I are present... Whenever I look at this photo I am happy, I think of the flow of time and how fast it goes, I live the childhood of my sisters and their excitement, ... , I miss my mom. Whenever I look at this photo, I smile.”

M6’s photo: (A photo with his older sister in childhood).

“I love this photo a lot, I am very happy in this photo and I look very healthy. I look at my cheeks, they are fleshy and red, alive, I feel like squeezing my cheeks, my sister is very happy also, I remember the happy days I had with her when we were children. I was very happy when I was a child, I want to be a child, I was happy back then, now I am very tired, this is why this photo is so important to me.”

When the answers the group members gave to tis question were examined, eight members stated that they had positive memories and that whenever they looked at the photo they felt happy when they claimed the importance of the photo for them. Only one member (M8) has brought a photo which he expressed that it reminded her of negative memories. In Table 1 the meaning attributed to the photos the group members brought was presented as main theme.

Table 1. The general theme of the answers the group members gave to the question “Why did you chose this photo, Does this photo have a special meaning for you?”

Members	“Does this photo have a special meaning for you?”
M1 *	This reminds me of a special day and the people I love
M2	I like the way I laugh in this photo, because I cannot laugh anymore, this reminds me of laughing.
M3	There is an energy in this photo, an energy of life
M4	I can see in this photo that my life is real.
M5	I chose this because it is a sign of our friendship
M6	I want to be a kid, this reminds me of my happiness
M7	This photo reminds me of my black hair, I miss being like that.
M8	I don’t know why, but this photo arouses a feeling of resentment and reminds me of my mistakes
M9	I chose this because it is a token of our friendship

* M1: Member 1, M2: Member 2, ..., M9: Member 9

2. Findings Related to the Types of Emotions and Thoughts that Arise from the Photos They Brought to the Group for Themselves and Others (Form 1): It was observed that group members provided detailed information related to the story of the photo with the question "What is the story of this photo?" Some of the statements of the members were provided below as examples.

M1: "In January in the year 2004, we had visited my uncle in Adana Karaisalı. I was very excited to see a new town and meet new people. My uncle took us to the mountain for us to play snowball. I was to see the snow for the first time. I wanted my father to be there, I remember this very distinctly. ... I walked on the snow with difficulty, it was a very white day. When I was tired, I laid on the snow, it was a very different feeling, it was very comforting to leave one's weight on the ground in full. At that moment, I felt like I got away from all that was happening. It was as if I was by myself. Later on, me, my sisters and brothers, my mother, my uncle and my aunt in law continued to play snowball. I remember having a headache because of the reflection of the sun. Despite this, in order not to miss out on the moment, I joined my mother and my sisters and brothers who were building a snowman."

When the statements of the members were analyzed, it is seen that they remembered in detailed way the meaning of the day, what went on, what kind of emotions and thoughts they had and what they did. In addition to this, it is seen that the weather condition and its effect on them were remembered clearly as well. It is also seen that some of the members remembered and stated the date very clearly.

Examples from the answers of the members to the question "What comes to your mind when you look at this photo?" were provided below.

M1: "Whenever I look at this photo, I am happy, I think of the absence of my father but I immediately think of another photo where my father is together with all of us."

M2: "This photo always reminds me of my smile and how happy I become when I laugh. I become happy every time I look at it. I remember my friend who I love and I relive the happiness of the warm bond between us."

M3: "Whenever I look at this photo, I become happy. I think of the importance and beauty of friendship. I think of my friends and whenever I go to Çanakkale I meet my friends."

It can be seen in the example statement and other statements, it was seen that the group members stressed the emotions that arose from the photo they chose. They stated that they felt the positive and negative emotions they had when the photo was taken whenever they looked at the photo.

Table 2. The emotional themes constructed from the statements to the question "What comes to your mind when you look at this photo?" and their frequencies

Themes	Frequency	%
Friendship, warmth, sincerity	/	4.8
Friendship	////	18.7
Happiness, excitement	///	14.3
Separation, longing	/	4.8
The happiness of being together	//	9.6
Solidarity	///	14.3
Longing	//	9.6
The desire to be with the loved ones	///	14.3
The happiness of making new friends	/	4.8
Resentment, guilt	/	4.8

When Table 2 is analyzed, the list of emotions that arise from the photo counselees have chosen is seen. The members especially chose the photos with positive emotions. Only one member has brought a photo which arose a negative emotion (resentment) for him.

3. Findings Related to the Assigned Meaning to the Same Photo by Different Members (Form 2): The findings related to the answers of the members given to the question “*What can be the story of this photo?*”: The story of the photo shared in the group was treated in the following way;

M9: “*That day-last year- my friends and I made a trip. We all had the wish to do something together. The desire to be with the classmates at the same school,... I remember Kadıkoy, the air of Kadıkoy and the crowd over there...*”

In the same photo, other members summarized the story in the subsequent way: M1: A group of friends who have skipped school, M2: The stooges had a great day, M3: A group who is there to conquer Istanbul, M4: This group will dissolve, they will leave each other, they have met for one last time, M5: A group of eight close friends hanging out together, they wanted to immortalize this day, M6: A close, sincere group who doesn't like girls, M7: The immortalization of the union of a close group, M8: The togetherness of close friends on a beautiful day, M9: The desire to be together with everyone, to do something together and to pass time together.

Related to the same photo, M5, M7 and M8 created a similar story of the member who has shared the photo. Other members have created different stories. In addition to this, M3, M4 and M6 all created different stories and brought negative aspects to the story.

Findings related to the question “*What do you think when you look at this photo?*”: The statements related to the photo of the member who volunteered to share his photo with the group (M9) and the statements of other members related to this photo were presented below. Member 9's statements in response to the same question in Form 1:

M9: “*Being together was a nice feeling. When I look at this photo, I remember different characteristics and situations related to each of my friends. It is a happy situation to be with different people and different thoughts. When I look at this photo I remember the different memories I have with each of them.*”

In the same photo, other members summarized the story in the following way: M1: *People who love each other are together, like my family, sincerity*, M2: *Friendship and passing time together*, M3: *There are people who are close to each other but there are also people who are together out of necessity, or people who are not happy for being* M4: *Being together for the last time and separation, longing, yearning*, M5: *Friendship and solidarity*, M6: *Unity brings strength, we are here as one, a show of power*, M7: *A safe friendship with close relations*, M8: *Friendship and the rare occasion of it, cherishing*. When the statements of the members were examined, it is seen that six members stated similar themes reminding of positive emotions, M3 and M4 stated negative emotions and situations related to the photo shown.

Discussion and Result

As a result of the application, it was observed that the use of photography enables the initiation and deepening of communication among the group members. There are various research findings that show that the use of photography in the counseling environment is effective in initiating communication with the client and understanding his/her world (Hunsberger, 1984; Koretsky, 2001; Weiser, 2004; Martin, 2009; Seifert, 2014). In the previous studies, it was stressed that photograph has a unique potential for therapeutic communication which will be established with resisting clients with a verbal communication disability and with the clients inclined to construct better communication via visual agents. Weiser (2004) reached the conclusion that the use of photography created a warm and sincere environment, and Prins (2013) has found that communication initiated naturally as a social interaction improved the quality of the relationship.

The group members were asked why they chose this specific photo to bring to the counseling environment and whether this photo had a special meaning for them. Of the group members who participated in the study, eight of them brought a photo with a positive meaning and one has brought a photo with a negative meaning. Weiser (1998), who has similarly made studies for long years, stated that people rarely chose painful photos that showed the times they felt pain. In addition to this, there are studies that show that people prefer beautiful and happy moments that are meaningful for them and which they can later recall as "favorite" to take photos. (Wheeler, 2009). Wheeler (2009) sees looking at the photo as a starting point for better understanding the client, and to learn his personal story. In this study, it can be said that very private information related to the clients was gathered in just one session.

The group members were asked about the story of the photo they chose and what the photo reminded of them. All members stated in writing that they felt the same emotions and what they remembered related to that "moment." With this way, it was observed that in the first session and first therapeutic dialogue, information related to the life of the client can be gathered. There are many research findings related to the use of photo in entering to the inner world of the client (Prins, 2013), understanding the life story (Seifert, 2014), and realizing what is important for him (Martin, 2009). According to Cormier & Hackney (2013, 131-134) while clients told his life story concured emotions that they made enriched mesage. There are also findings that show that while the clients prefer the photos most important to them, they remember the moment in the photo in detail during the counseling process or the training environment, and that they relive the same emotions, thoughts and even physical experience (Martin, 2009; Prins, 2013). From this perspective, counseling can start with a photo or a photo album. This way, lots of information can be reached related to the client and the life of the client.

The perception of the other members of the photo shared by each member of the group and the meaning attributed to these photos were studied. It was found that each member attributed a different meaning to the photo shared and that different stories were created. Since personal perception is likely to change, it is possible to say that different people will read and understand the photo as a visual image differently. In other words, the same photo as a visual image will be read differently by different people (Weiser, 2004). Aligning with the findings of the application, Weiser (1998) stresses that the same photo may create different meanings in each person and that the real meaning, image and the emotions rising from that photo do not originate in the people who look at the photo. It can be said that this difference causes different perceptions in each person, and for this reason may be caused by the different reading of these. Finson and Pederson (2011) and Wheeler (2009) stress that two people looking at the same object or event see different things. The accuracy of this difference seen by two people on the photo (Weiser, 1984, 2002, 2004), and the difference in meaning in a simple image, result from how each person perceive, expect, value and symbolize the world (Stevensa and Spearsa, 2009; Martin, 2009). Under these conditions, it can be said that it is natural for different members of the group to attribute different meanings to the photo from the meaning attributed by the owner of the photo.

This study was conducted in order to present an application for the purpose of education, and for this reason, the research findings are limited in such a way that they were conducted on individuals who have been receiving training in psychological counseling. From this perspective, the efficiency of phototherapy technique needs to be examined on real clients in the normal counseling process. In addition to this, the efficiency of the psychological counseling should be distinguished visually and verbally in the counseling process.

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