Creating Thematic PhotoBooks: An Innovative Integration of Therapeutic PhotoActivities

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Abstract

An integration of various discrete therapeutic photo activities referenced in the published literature is described. Discrete therapeutic photo activities, such as looking at pictures, posing for pictures, taking pictures, discussing pictures taken, are combined into a creative project for a population of participants. The completed project is a “PhotoBook” depicting the people’s ideas, feelings and visions related to a particular theme. The description gives details for one exemplary holiday theme, Thanksgiving, with comments on extending the procedures to other themes and populations. The project builds upon past applied research on therapeutic photo activities and extends that work into an innovative way of channeling those activities into a final, creative product that has value in and of itself.

Introduction

The camera, and the various photographic activities it makes possible, have proven helpful in many areas of life. In particular, photography has become an important medium in the general field of “art therapy.” Looking at pictures, taking pictures, posing for pictures—all these activities have been employed by art therapists to further therapeutic goals with clients. In most every case, the aim of the activity has been either to provide diagnostic insights for the therapist, to stimulate therapeutic exchange between therapist and client, or to provide an activity for the client that might prove therapeutic in and of itself.

Doug Stewart (1979), for example, provided a summary of the types of activities used in therapeutic photowork. He outlined these methods:

1) Using any photograph as a projective technique to explore the patient’s unconscious.
2) Looking at a family album, in order to discuss patient’s history
3) Patient takes photographs, while therapist observes the behavior and choices of targets for photographs.

4) Self-portraits of the client, to explore feelings about the self.

Most of the articles published about the use of the camera and photography in the helping relationship describe activities that fall into one of those four categories.

In all these cases, once the activity has been completed, and the therapeutic process engaged, there is no further use for the products (the photos) of these activities. In this paper, we will describe an innovative integration of these discrete processes into a program that not only accomplishes the usual therapeutic goals, but also results in a creative product that has value in and of itself. Specifically, we will describe a program that results in a “Thematic Photo Book,” that can be the basis for a display to others, an offering into the community in which the therapy occurs. It can also provide a source of further learning and exploration by the participants themselves.

**What is the “Thematic Photobook” Program?**

The general idea of this program is to enlist a group of participants (whether they be a resident population of people with special needs, such as mentally retarded adults or autistic children, an after school program, or an ongoing classroom in a school, or even members of a club or organization) in creating a book based upon the taking of photographs during several instructional activities with therapeutic value. The resulting book depicts their ideas, feelings and visions concerning a particular theme, as if the book were a form of celebrating that theme. Possible themes may include holidays, seasons of the year, hobbies, or other favorite subject.

The purpose of the program is to provide a means for both diagnosis and treatment at the same time, in a context that encourages both improved intra-psychic functioning and improved social interaction and environmental contact among the participants through involvement with an authentically creative project.

The program involves seven to eight participants and two leaders—a person who leads the activities, whom we refer to here as the “Producer of the book” (who may be a therapist or other human services professional who typically works with the chosen population or a special education teacher) and a person who takes photographs and helps the participants use a camera, whom we refer to as the photo-specialist (someone who is a professional Photographer and also who has experience working with the chosen population).
The Producer conducts the process. If the Producer were a teacher, she or he may wish to create a photo-book on the theme of the yearly seasons, or perhaps a special topic within the classroom curriculum. If the Producer were an occupational therapist, that person might wish to orient the photo-book toward daily living skills, such as hand washing or setting the table. An art therapist might be drawn to such a theme as Holiday because of the feelings evoked. The photo-specialist photographically documents the process and helps the participants with the camera work.

The Program’s Three Phases

The first phase is an introductory one. It serves diagnostic purposes in that it provides activities that allow the leaders to observe the program participants’ behaviors to determine problem areas as well as talents, strengths or weaknesses in many areas. The photo activities thus serve as a microcosm to reflect the life in that setting.

The second phase is an experimental one. It serves the purpose of testing the implications of any diagnoses the leaders may have considered during the introductory phase. It provides activities that require the participants to practice new skills, to engage in behaviors that require cooperation and collaboration with others. During this time, observations of participant behavior as well as coaching participants provides for both further diagnostic work as well as the opportunity to shape constructive behavior.

The third phase is therapeutic in focus. Here activities are presented for the participants to review and evaluate their work, perhaps to overcome or correct weaknesses, and/or to gain some new skills and/or behaviors.

To understand the purposes of these three phases, consider a project to create something from given material. First one might observe and study the material, to see how it behaves on its own. Then one might interact with the material, to test its response to various treatments and to develop a better idea on how to handle the material when it comes time to create the object from it. The final step, armed with this information about the material, would be to work with the material to create the desired object.

In the case of our integrated photo-program, we want to help the participants develop by creating a specific product—a photo-book. The introductory first stage of this process, therefore, allows the Producer and Photographer to observe the participants, to get an idea of their individual propensities. The Photographer’s taking pictures adds the dimension of the objective observer, in that the photos provide concrete data about the unfolding
events. Then the second phase serves an experimental purpose by having the participants attempt certain tasks, so that the Producer may test hypotheses about the best way to bring out the potentialities of the individuals. Finally, the time comes to implement the insights into directed tasks to complete the photo-book.

Throughout all three phases, there is an emphasis on the value of working as a group, team, or a “family.” Having the participants discover that they can work together is an important therapeutic goal of this project. As part of the project, the participants each have responsibilities, which, along with their participation, helps to build self-esteem and self-worth, and develop communication skills. Thus the three parts of this project has an overall, holistic goal of improving the community life of the participants by using camera work and photography to provide a unique context for personal development in a social situation that also results in an educational creative product that others might appreciate.

The working atmosphere of the project is quite important. We believe that a pleasant and enjoyable atmosphere is important, so that participants feel more relaxed during this unusual activity. We try to make it seem like a game/performance. We respond to everyone’s participation in a positive manner, using gentle correction when necessary. At the same time, as we progress from one phase to the next, the leaders gradually shift their projected attitude from one of total acceptance of the participants’ behaviors into one of an increasing level of demand for skilled or focused behaviors.

The thematic photo book program is described in detail below, using a holiday theme—Thanksgiving—for our example, as it might be applied in an afterschool program with a group of high functioning mentally retarded young adults. We will also note how the program might be modified for other themes and for other specific populations.

### 1. The Introductory Phase

The main goal of this phase is to learn about the participants and to create motivation. The concrete activities are the goals they serve are equally important. The goals of this phase are first to create motivation among the participants, both at an individual level and as a group. We want to use the person’s own natural motivation (their particular need for praise or approval or an attachment to a particular object or some activity or like of a certain food) to begin work, and then to create personal motivation among the participants to participate in a
team effort, and to discover their talents, abilities and interests. There are two separate activities in this phase, both of which allow the leaders to form some diagnostic ideas about the participants.

First Activity: “Let’s Get to Know Each Other.”

The first activity serves as an introduction. It includes some presentation on why we are here and what we are going to do. This activity also introduces the roles participants may assume, and the future contributions they may make to the group’s project.

Here is how we proceed with this activity. The activity begins with the leaders introducing themselves to the group and explaining the project:

“We are going to work as a group, together, to explore different projects involving the camera and photographs. I’ll help us by leading the activity, giving instructions, and helping people with their activities.”

Because we will Create The Book I’d be as a Producer. Mr/s Smith is going to take pictures and help you with everything connecting to photography. So, we’ll call him a Photographer. For creating this book we needs some other kinds of work to do-we need writer, artists, designers, etc..”

The Producer’s introduction continues on by emphasizing the value of working together:

“We are going to make our work more special by working together. Each person will get to do something important that will contribute to our group’s project. That way, each person will have the fun of working on their own and the satisfaction of seeing how their own work adds to the group’s project. Everyone has something special to contribute. Now we have to find out what you all would like to do in our project.”

The Producer points out the various materials (paper, colored paper, ribbons, glue bottles, etc.) and encourages the participants to choose what they’d like to do. The Producer picks up different materials and names some activities that can be done with them, to give the participants some ideas to help them to realize what is their favorite or most fun thing to do:

“Here are some plain white sheets of paper and here are some crayons. Some people like to draw pictures, and some people like to write words. You could write out your name in your favorite color. Here are some scissors. Some people like to cut out shapes. Here is some glue.”
Someone could cut out shapes and glue them together to make pretty things.

The Producer next explains that it’s now time to find out about everybody else in the group:

“Let’s learn about what things each of us can do as part of the group project. For our project we need people who can cut, glue, color, take pictures, and many other important jobs. And we’re going to find out about this in a really fun way, by taking pictures of us doing our favorite things! We’ll begin by learning each other’s names and learning what each of us enjoys the most.”

_In this manner, the Producer interests the participants in getting involved in some activity. The purpose is to create a situation where the Producers can observe the participants as they engage in favorite behaviors._

_During this time, the Photographer takes pictures of the participants as they engage themselves in the activities. The Producer may have certain questions in mind as she or he observes the participants and these questions serve to guide the photographer in the choice of pictures taken. Hopefully, these pictures will answer such questions as_

1) How does the participant interact with others?
2) Does the participant show initiative? In what way? When?
3) Is the person able to make choices?
4) Is the person familiar with the materials?
5) Does the person show being comfortable in their activity?
6) What seems to be this person’s favorite activity?

_Included in the range of acceptable activities is camera work itself. Thus the Photographer responds to those participants who said they like to take photographs by providing them with a camera and necessary instructions. Then those participants are also encouraged to take photographs of the other participants as they engage in their favorite activity._

_This particular stage of the program comes to an end when all participants have found a favorite activity. When each person has had their picture taken while involved in their favorite activity, and there has been at least one picture taken of the group as a whole, then it is time to move on to the next phase._

_As part of this activity the Producer instructs the participants in organizing their work for viewing:_

“We’ve had FUN enjoying our favorite activities, and we’ve had our pictures taken doing this FUN stuff. Now it’s time for us to put this work on display. Each person here will have a special role in preparing our display. Who wants to help choose the pictures? Who wants to help cut them?”

In this manner, the Producer steers the participants to collaborate to prepare the pictures for display. The working atmosphere of the project is quite important. We believe that a pleasant and enjoyable atmosphere helps the participants feel more relaxed during this unusual activity. We try to make it seem like a game/performance.

As the activity unfolds, the person who likes to cut then cuts out pictures, the person who likes to glue then glues them onto a large poster board. Then a person who likes writing writes the captions, such as "John the Photographer", or "Sam the artist" (for a person who likes coloring), and the artist makes some decorations on the displays. In this manner, we find in our group that we have our own Photographer, artist, writer, handyman, and other important players in our project.

When the displays are finished, the Producers put them up on the wall for viewing. The Producer makes a large title for this project, such as “Getting to Know Each other by Working Together” It’s a time for celebration. The Producers give plenty of praise to the display and brag to the group on their collaboration skills:

“Isn’t it fun? Great! Look at what we were able to create together! This project shows us the power and the fun of working together. And we can see each person, and how doing their favorite thing contributes to the whole and final project! Look at [name] this photo and what he/she is doing. Isn’t it wonderful? Look at [name] in this photo! […]points out each participant and their favorite activity, praising that person’s contribution. Isn’t it wonderful when we do the things we enjoy and it helps out with the group? Maybe sometimes we can even teach one another and help one another learn our particular skills. We are doing so well as a group! Let’s give ourselves some applause! [lots of clapping and cheering].”

In this celebratory and appreciative manner we try to highlight that everybody is good in something special and we’ll use it for our common work for future projects. In this way, we also are giving participants both some roles and certain responsibilities. The goal is to build conditions for nurturing self-worth by appreciation of a person’s work and how it contributes to the whole. In some sense, what this process does is the reverse of “marginalization,” where instead of making a person feel like sitting on the sidelines,
the person feels like participating in the community and is rewarded and appreciated for doing so. Giving titles to every photo and project helps to increase awareness of what work is about, makes it easy to refer to, and easy to remember. A title functions almost like a “brand name,” to quickly identify and bring to mind certain positive associations. Once again, it should be mentioned that it is important to be attentive to each participant’s reaction, involvement, remarks, behaviors, expressions. Everything going on is worth photographing, so that we record on pictures every interesting or significant moments which can describe each and every participant.

We respond to everyone’s participation in a positive manner, using gentle correction when necessary.

Peter likes to glue things, for example. Sometimes he puts glue on the wrong side of a picture. Rather than point out this mistake or indirectly criticize this person, we say something like “OK, and now we have to put some glue on the side of the picture that attaches to the (scrapbook) paper… very good!”

We want to help each person to feel good about themselves and to look forward to continue with our project.

The concrete activities are the goals they serve are equally important. The goals of this phase are first to create motivation among the participants, both at an individual level and as a group. We want to use the person’s own natural motivation (their like of a certain food, or a particular need for praise, or an attachment to a particular object or some activity) to begin work, and then to create personal motivation among the participants to discover their talents, abilities and interests.

To give some examples, John, is attached to his string. He holds it constantly, all the time playing with it. The Producer might suggest him to do “the handyman part of our work,” explaining that John’s ability to do different things with that string would be very useful and helpful for different things related to our project. Meanwhile, Grace is cutting paper all the time into small pieces. The Producer might suggest that she would be great as a “a cutting-expert occupation” (with some training of course) so that she might help others cut on their pictures. Gill, as a final example, listens to music, constantly wearing his headphones which he never parts with it. The Producers might make him to be responsible for the “music business” for the whole group when there is a party.

In this stage we openly and frequently honor the person’s special attachments and/or interests to make the person feel welcomed and accepted regardless of what s/he brought to the group. Our goal is to slowly and hopefully imperceptibly to redirect the
person’s attachments toward something more productive or healthy. We want to create a group motivation that makes each participant want to participate in the group activity. We also wish to create conditions to encourage communication among participants in these ways: asking for help, offering help, a desire to share, or a curiosity about other participants’ work. At the same time, we want to create conditions whereby we may observe the participants’ behaviors for the purpose of evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. It is advisable to expose the participant to a wide variety of situations so as to provide the broadest base of observations. The challenge is to create an atmosphere which is inviting and supportive of both a group feeling as well as personal, individual inclusion. Each person gets to feel some sense of responsibility for giving something to the group’s effort through their participation. Furthermore, that sense of personal responsibility is mirrored by the group as appreciation for that individual. The individual gets to experience the group’s acknowledgement of their individual contribution.

The method for dealing with these challenging objectives is to take a very accepting approach. We use a low-key, no pressure type of leadership style. For example, we tend to ignore inappropriate behavior.

For example, in one case, Will liked to sit on the floor at all times. We ignored that behavior, but would ask him, from time to time, to do something where he needed to get up to do it, such as bringing something to the Producer. As he did so, we praised him profusely for making that effort, and then left him alone. Our goal here was to create activities for Will that would motivate him to abandon his place on the floor and join the group around the table.

Generally speaking, we use redirection instead of correction. We attempt to involve the participant in more appropriate behavior, applying excessive praise, support, encouragement and appreciation. By adopting a permissive attitude as much as possible, we create a more open situation that allows us to observe a more spontaneous expression of behavior. We want the participants to “show themselves” in their behaviors with these projects, so our involvement with them, as in instructions, must be minimal, and we avoid making corrections. Yet we record as much as possible, taking pictures of the process. Specifically, we take pictures which reflect something special and positive about the person, some way in which that person is particularly inventive, shows initiative, is very social or likes coloring. The idea is to gather pictures that show proof of these traits in a visible form that can be shown to the participant to bring their attention to appreciate these qualities.
Second Activity: “Making Photo ID Cards”

The second activity of the Introductory phase is “Making Photo ID Cards.” Here the participants tell a little bit more about themselves. They may represent their favorite activity or subject matter by choosing a picture to represent it on their ID card.

In this project we encourage and invite wider possibilities for creativity. We make them focus on themselves, to represent themselves the way they would love to be seen. In this second part of the introductory phase, we guide the participants in the making of photo ID cards, which will have uses in future projects while helping us meet our diagnostic goals in this early stage of our work.

The goals of the photo ID activity is to provide opportunities for the participants to make choices, and in so doing, provide a context for personal development. The challenge to the participant is to become aware of some special things that describe that person. The activities to embrace that challenge encourage initiative, creativity, and curiosity to explore different materials and ways of using them toward the goal of self-expression.

The Producer introduces this photo-activity by explaining its purpose and the opportunities involved:

“Today each of us is going to make our own Photo ID! A photo ID is a card we can wear, or carry with us. Look, see mine—it has my picture and it also says my name, , and it says something special about me:” “You can learn something about me by looking at my ID card.”

The instructions mainly focus on the various materials available:

“How will you make your photo ID? There is all kinds of materials to choose from. And you can use these stencils, stickers, stamps, and other decorative materials on your ID. What do you think you’d like? You can put your birthday, some flowers, food, a picture of your school building, or whatever you’d like. You get to choose. On your photo ID you’ll have that picture that was on our display, of you doing your favorite thing. Or you can choose to have a new photograph taken, and you can choose who will take this photo of you. But first we need to pose for our photo ID Card.”

Either the Producer or the Photographer may coach the participant in expressing different feelings or attitudes by changing facial expressions. Instead
of habitually smiling for the camera, the participant may adopt a serious face, or a thoughtful one. The photo-specialist can take pictures of all these poses. Afterwards the Producer would discuss with the participant which pose the participant likes most, and why (Ammerman & Fryrer, 1975; Cornelison & Arsenian, 1960; Fryrear, Nuell & Ridley, 1974).

This kind of activity and discussion gives the Producer important information about the participants’ awareness of facial expressions as well as their ability to relax, to pose, and to be in charge of their own expression. These skills are particularly important for the mentally retarded population. Some of the participants in this special population act as if they have been trained to smile at the sight of a camera, to immediately pose with a “cheese” expression, so here we give them an opportunity to think about putting on different expressions.

Once again, during the activity, the leaders carefully observe the participants, to meet the diagnostic goals. How do the participants interact? What do their choices say about the person? The purpose of this observation is to learn more about the strengths of the participant and to diagnose any weaknesses that might be improved.

Mike knows, for example, exactly what to put on his ID (besides his name—his home address). He works hard and very focused. The Producer might start a conversation with Mike about the area he lives in, or about the apartment/house he lives in, gently getting more information or getting the answer why he put his home address there. It may turn out that Mike’s family and home life is the most positive and valued part of his life.

To give another example, Mark is sitting with a blank piece of paper and wants to put nothing on it. Maybe he just doesn’t care. Maybe he doesn’t know where to start. Thus the Producer may intervene by giving Mark some ideas. The instructor might ask Mark about food, or about music that he likes. Perhaps Mark has some special friends. This discussion can help Mark stimulate his own thinking process.

In the case that a participant can not think of anything to put on their card, the Producer can simply present that person with a large assortment of stickers. “Just put the ones you like on your card.”

The choices the participant makes will provide useful information to the leaders that can be built upon as the project progresses.

So, in that activity we could see person level of awareness about himself and his life, his ability and willingness to make choices, to take initiative, to create something on his own. Posing for pictures gives some information about person’s awareness on feelings and emotions.
Summary of Introductory Phase

In the Introductory phase, we pursued the goals of explaining the photo-group program to create motivation among the participants, while presenting activities that would allow the leaders to form some diagnostic ideas about the participants. We presented the idea of working together as a group on a common creative project. We discovered some of the interests of the participants. We introduced camera work by having participants pose for pictures to be used on their photo ID cards. The leaders’ attitude during this phase was totally accepting and encouraging to enhance a feeling of safety and enthusiasm among the participants and to facilitate the leaders’ diagnostic perceptions.

2. The Experimental Phase

The experimental phase provides activities that require the participants to practice new skills, to engage in behaviors that require cooperation and collaboration with others. During this time, observations of patient behavior as well as coaching patients provides for both further diagnostic work.

The purpose of this phase is to look for workable approaches by testing different ways which might provide motivation for the participants. Looking for productive relations between leaders and participants, as well as between different participants themselves is also an important goal in this phase. During this phase there will be some pressure and demands involved, testing and establishing the participants’ limits. The activities include learning some new behavioral skills, such as taking photographs. This phase allows us to test many areas of ability of a person, which will be built into the project work. During this work the Leaders could test participants’ knowledge of colors, numbers, concepts such as big and small, closer and further, etc.

Leaders need to always be extremely careful to keep each person in an open and relaxed state of acceptance, allowing whatever will emerge. The greatest tool here could be humor. Pressure in the form of demands should be in some fun form. It needs to be a pleasant and interesting experience. All testing should be done in indirect ways.

Whereas in the first phase the theme was getting to know each other and our potential roles and contributions, in the second phase, the theme moves to focus on the Thanksgiving content itself, emphasizing gratitude and appreciation.
and the concept of family. Such attitudes are helpful for anyone. The Experimental phase consists of three activities.

**First Activity: Discussing the Meaning of Thanksgiving**

This phase begins with the Producer initiating some discussion on the history and meaning of Thanksgiving:

“Let’s talk about Thanksgiving. The Thanksgiving holiday is a day set aside to honor the inspiration of those pilgrims who first settled in America. They decided to show a way of thanking the Native Americans whose help enabled America’s first European settlers to survive in the New World.” The instructor shows a picture of the ship the Mayflower ship and other pictures related to that first thanksgiving. An instructor says, “Since that time, Thanksgiving has grown to also be a time when we stop and thank God, the Earth, and other people for their hard work and their generosity to their fellow man.”

The Producer encourages the participants to discuss the ways we express our gratitude. “Who here know what it is like to feel grateful? Who here can tell us what it is like to feel thankful? Who has something to feel thankful for?”

*During the ensuing discussion, the leaders can observe the level of awareness demonstrated by the participants. They can observe the level of participation and expressive abilities. An effective stimulus to discussion is the showing of pictures.*

*Discussing pictures substantially helps people to express themselves and to show their awareness as well as some knowledge about colors, numbers, etc. The leaders need to be extremely vigilant to be sure to support any attempt of anyone to participate in the discussion. The leaders should encourage and praises any of the participants’ initiatives, ideas, or suggestions in order to help the participants to remain involved as much as possible.*

The leaders can gradually move the discussion to the topic of the different things that one might be grateful for, and then ways of expressing that gratitude. “Who can tell us something about being grateful? What can we be grateful for?”

“One way we can show our gratitude is by saying ‘thank you!’ Another way is to say thanks by making a Thanksgiving Day card.”
Second Activity: Learning to take “still life” pictures

“We are going to make Thanksgiving Cards,” announces the Producer “for our families and friends. We are going to make these cards by learning to take photographs,” while showing an example to the participants.

The Photographer brings out some props, such as vegetables, flowers, vases, plates, baskets, as well as items such as fall colored ribbons, bows, maybe even a place setting of dishes and silverware. The Producer can offer some suggestions about what is common in Thanksgiving cards and pictures, such as apples, pumpkins, potatoes, cranberries, corn in their husks, and turkeys, to suggest the idea of the abundance of the harvest.

The Photographer begins with some demonstrations of composing various objects for a photograph. Also demonstrates how to use the camera. Each participant gets a turn setting up a photograph and taking the picture.

While the other participants observe the process, each participant receives individualized attention in setting up and taking a still life photograph.

“Who wants to go first?” asks the Producer. “Who already knows what they’d want in their Thanksgiving Day card?” When one participant indicates a readiness to take a photograph, that person is invited to step forward to do so.

The Photographer interacts with the participant to get ready for the photograph and asks, “What object or objects do you wish in your photo?” When the participant points out the desired objects, the Photographer comments, “OK, now please place these items in the exact position and pose that you wish them to be in your picture.” Every person puts these items by his ID card as a sign of authorship. When the tableau is readied, the instructor turns to the topic of operating the camera. “Look through the viewfinder here. Do you like what you see?” If the participant wishes to change the positions in the tableau, the Photographer encourages the person to do so. When the participant is satisfied with how the tableau appears in the viewfinder, the Photographer indicates how to take the picture. “To take the picture, push this button here, being careful not to move the camera.”

During the picture taking process the leaders can learn a lot about each participant’s style of paying attention, learning, doing things and interacting with others. The leaders should pursue these observations in an indirect manner, not calling
attention to these observations. The goal is to keep the participants’ attention focused on the project while the leaders observe what happens. The leaders can offer assistance, answer questions and make suggestions regarding the project.

With people who have problem on making choices the leader can help the participants in choosing what they want in the picture.

"Do you want a flowers or vegetables or fruit?" "Do you want to put them in a basket, or bowl?" “What would you like more, a square shape or a round shape?"

The leaders should stay a little bit ahead of the level of the participant’s awareness and be extremely careful in asking questions in order not to discourage a person by the difficulty of the question.

For example if the Photographer notices that the participant feels some confusion or embarrassment from a question like, “Would you prefer square or a round shape?” he should quickly switch to a different, simpler question a person would feel more comfortable with, such as “The square shape has a blue color and the round shape is green. Which color you like more? Green? Great choice! I’m glad. It’s my favorite color also.” The interaction needs to be pleasant and enjoyable, yet with a little bit of pushing to test the participant’s limits of comprehension.

The Photographer helps people to use a camera and helps them to take pictures. There should not be an attempt to get good result at this time, but simply to test a person’s response to learning new skills--cooperation or resistance?

The Photographer backs up the participants’ own photography by taking pictures him/herself. In this way, should a participant’s photo not turn out well, the Photographer instructor’s photo of the same subject matter could be used instead.

We want to avoid focus on photo taking skills beyond the basics, and focus more on the activity of noticing, choosing and taking photos of the environment, not on excellent photography.

We suggest using a digital camera for this project. The results are instantaneous. Rather than the challenging task of setting up a picture by looking through the viewfinder (which many mentally retarded individuals have difficulty with), they may simply view the digital screen to preview their photos and to view the outcome.
The photography exercise is completed with an instant camera. Thus each participant receives a copy of their photograph soon after it is taken. The photographs are then used in the next activity for this phase.

**Third Activity: Making Thanksgiving Cards**

After everyone has had a chance to take a picture, the group’s activity switches to making the Thanksgiving cards themselves. The Leader announces,

> “Now we are ready to make our Thanksgiving Cards for people we love—our friends and relatives. On our cards we will paste our photographs. What else may we put on these cards? We’ll see!”

The Producer passes out blank cards for the participants to use in making their Thanksgiving cards. The Producer gives instructions for gluing the photograph to these cards. The participants are encouraged to add whatever decorations might be desired to the card. The instructor explains that on the back of the card, the participant should write “Made by…John [participant’s name]”. At the conclusion of the activity, the participants can place their cards in envelopes. The leaders can help the participants write on the envelopes the name and address to whom the card is to be given.

> During this activity, the involvement of the Producer is a bit more assertive. The Producer points to the variety of materials available for decorating the cards, thus imposing the need for making choices. By making repeated suggestions, the Producer encourages the participants to show initiative by using a variety of materials. The Producer makes many suggestions to each participant. The guide suggestions are aimed to stretch the participant a little bit, to encourage trying things that are a bit more difficult. Nevertheless, should the participant evidence frustration or the inability to pursue more difficult suggestions, the instructor needs to be ready to back down on any given suggestion in order to avoid any uncomfortable moments. Although we are doing a lot of testing here, the activity still should be fun, enjoyable with plenty of interaction and sharing.

All the while, the photo-specialist is taking photographs of the interactions, getting pictures of the participants’ reactions to the process. The Producer can use these pictures later in evaluating each participant’s skill level, personal issues, and response to challenges.

At the end of the project, the Photographer will take picture of the whole group with the cards in their hands. Afterwards, the leaders thank everybody...
for their participation and collaboration. Looking at the group photo can be an occasion for celebration!

The leaders have to pay attention to the individual participant’s special interests and preferences. The leaders also have to encourage situations which might help the participant answer questions such as the following:

1. What does the participant like to do?
2. What can the person do well?
3. What interests does the person have?
4. How does the person communicate with other participants?
5. What is the level of the person’s independence?
6. How does the person react to criticism or failure?
7. How does the person respond to help?
8. Does the person ask for help?
9. Does the person enjoy doing the work?
10. Does the person try to cooperate?
11. Does the person like to help other people?

Summary of Experimental Phase

In the Experimental phase, we pursued the goals of teaching new skills to the participants, such as encouraging a group discussion focused on our Thanksgiving theme, having participants choose and arrange thematic objects to create still life pictures, and assembling the pictures into Thanksgiving cards. Having the participants engage in these activities helped the Leaders pursue the goal of experimenting with their diagnostic ideas formed in the Introductory phase, by being a bit more assertive with the participants to investigate how they responded, making their choices and interacting with the group.

3. The Therapeutic Phase

The third and final phase consists of three activities, setting the table, , and enjoying the meal and making a photo book. The phase is therapeutic in that the Producer encourages responsible behavior, helping the participants behave together with dignity and respect, and starting to shape constructive, creative behavior somewhat beyond the participants’ original level of functioning.
In this part, we continue the Thanksgiving theme in two ways: looking for reasons to be grateful and celebrating a Thanksgiving meal together. The Photographer continues to take photos of all aspects of these activities for including in the photo book. There are three activities in this phase.

First Activity: Setting the Table

Setting a table for a holiday, celebratory meal is different from the daily activity of preparing a table for a meal. We place a special tablecloth on the table, and we put out our finest tableware. We decorate the table with flowers, for example, or other items suggestive of the holiday theme. It also requires the same kind of attention as a regular meal, in that we need to know the number of people attending the meal so that we set out the correct number of place settings. Each place setting requires the correct objects, fork, knife, cup, napkin, etc., thus calling for attention to details in order to arrange carefully these objects in an attractive manner.

For this activity, the Producer takes the initiative. The Producer leads the activity with a certain tone of respect. In so doing the Producer conveys the message that the tasks at hand require that the group work seriously, that the participants have a responsibility to others, for as we prepare for the meal, the pictures we take will become part of a photo book that may be used by others:

“We have worked together very well, getting to know each other and helping each other make our photo-ID cards. We’ve learned how to take pictures, and we’ve worked together to make Thanksgiving cards. Now we are going to complete our work by celebrating a Thanksgiving meal together. As we prepare to do so, we’ll work together in a special way. Each of us will have our responsibility, our job, our thing to contribute to the group’s celebration. We will need to work in a serious manner because we will be making a photo book that others will see. We hope they will be inspired by our work. So, before we’ll have our Thanksgiving meal we need to concentrate on work.”

The Producer is now familiar with each person in the group and will assign to each person a task that might be therapeutic for that person.

For example, Mary is hardworking person, but very shy and prefers to stay by herself. So the instructor might suggest that as Mary takes part in setting the table, that she poses for the Photographer while she works.
The Producer explains to each participant how to perform the assigned task and both instructors express praise to them as they perform their tasks.

For example, the Producer explains to Mary how to set the table in right way. As Mary proceeds to perform her task, the Producer might say, “We are grateful to Mary for setting a nice holiday table for us.”

The Producer also directs activities and makes comments to encourage cooperation and interaction among the participants.

For example, he might mention to another participant, “Steve, please help Mary by bringing in more dishes from the kitchen.” And then, as Steve performs this task, the Producer notes, “Thanks, Steve, for helping Mary to make our table beautiful.”

Setting the table involves a lot of cooperation, so the instructors try to involve participants as much as possible and create the situations for meaningful cooperation and interaction. The Leaders use the names of the participants often in their speaking, to help the participants learn each other’s names and use them.

For example, the Producer might say, “Please John, help Jim with the utensils.” This request would be followed by a “Thank you, John,” with some other words to call the group’s attention to John’s contribution of that moment.

All these remarks are geared toward encouraging participants to take an initiative and toward encouraging them to communicate with each other as much as possible.

All the while the table is being set, the Photographer takes pictures of the activities. Sometimes these are candid, unposed photos of the participants at work. Sometimes the Photographer engages a participant to pose during a particular activity when doing so may have therapeutic value.

For example, the Photographer might ask someone to open the refrigerator to show off the food that will be a part of the meal. “Sam, thanks for showing us the food in the refrigerator. We are grateful for the people who cooked and brought that food for us. We shall make a “Thank You” card to express our gratitude for this food.” Maybe, depending upon the Producer’s understanding of Sam’s personality and therapeutic needs, the Producer will ask Sam for a favor, “Sam, would you be willing to take this picture of all the food in the refrigerator.”

In addition to these pictures of setting the table, the Photographer also takes pictures of activities that express gratitude and how we give thanks. The photo
instructor also helps the participant who has been given the responsibility for taking photos. The Photographer may point out opportunities for good pictures, or help the participant-Photographer work the camera or set up the picture. In this way, the photo-book will be the product of both the Photographer and those participants who wish to take photographs. The Photographer continues taking pictures during the Thanksgiving meal.

Second Activity: The Thanksgiving Meal

Our main goal has been to involve people in a very direct, structured activity, making them responsible for their particular roles, whether taking pictures or some aspect of setting the table. Enjoying the meal, finally, should be strong motivation for the participants to make it happen. It is important to maintain the interest of participants and to keep the activities exciting, like a game, where performance counts, but is also fun.

The Producer may introduce the meal with some orienting remarks:

“Thanksgiving is a family celebration and we are here like a little family to support each other, to help each other to learn from each other and have nice time together. Thanksgiving is connected with food and we love food very much. We will enjoy a delicious meal together because we worked well and really hard to prepare for it and we deserve such a good meal.”

After the table has been set and the food has been placed, it is time for eating, and for some discussion along with the meal. During the meal, the Producer may observe very carefully people’s table manners, noticing those participants who need to have improved manners.

Such skills could be the topic of a future photo-activity, where people would pose while performing good manners, and photos would be taken, which could create a new photo-book, “A manual for Table Manners.” At this time, however, we would not be correcting anyone’s manners nor trying to train manners. However, observing the behaviors at this celebratory meal will provide information for the next photo-activity program, thus allowing an ongoing progression of therapeutic photo activities and programs.

Simple meal behaviors can be the subject and opportunity for further work. The simple act of passing a bowl of food from one participant to the next
can be the occasion for comment, photography, and praise. The Producer can point out to one participant that perhaps in front of that person is a bowl of food that may be desired by others at the table, and that the participant may wish to pass that bowl around the table. When the participant responds to this suggestion, the instructor gives that person praise, and the Photographer takes a picture of the event.

There can be discussion during the meal, as well as opportunities for more photographs:

“Isn’t this food good! I’m sure we are all thankful for this good food and for this celebration where we can eat this good food.” How people express their gratitude for this fine meal can be the subject for more photos. “What are the different ways we can express thanks? Let’s take a photo of each person expressing thanks in their own special way.” The Photographer then takes a picture of each person as they pose for their “Thank You!” picture. “Those of you who have religious feelings may wish to bless the food we eat. As you do so, we will take a picture of you saying the blessing.”

The Producer also explain that besides a religious approach, there are many other ways of expressing thanks, and invites the others to pose for their pictures while expressing thanks.

**Third Activity: Making the Photo-book**

After the pictures have been taken, it’s time to make book from them. In this activity the old things participants learned would be enhanced by the new skills of making a photobook. Also great therapeutic value is given to discussion of pictures (Ammerman & Fryrer, 1975; Cornelison & Arsenian, 1960; Fryrear, Nuell & Ridley, 1974). During discussion the Producer has to encourage the taking of initiative by the participants and their having independent opinions. The discussion also can reveal the participants’ awareness of having learned something and their awareness of the results of this learning. Did participants learn, for example, one another’s names? How did such learning affect the way the participants interacted? Do they understand what pictures are about? Can they make evaluations of better pictures over pictures that are of less value or relevance?

During this discussion it’s time for praise of those who needs praise:

“Look everybody how nicely Mary set the table” “Look at this picture! John is so helpful person”
In this group discussion, the Producer must imperceptibly promote group discussion so that the participants can show initiative and reveal their choices. Very important and therapeutically valued is the choice of pictures.

“There are few pictures of our Thanksgiving meal. Let's choose which are the best of them.”

*Here we can learn about the participants’ attention to details. We can see if there is any increased awareness about values of things, such as a participant’s comment like, “I like that one because here we can see everybody’s faces.”*

When all pictures are chosen the Producer draws everybody’s attention to the product of the very first activity—the display of the participants’ “occupations,” or roles, in the activity “Getting to Know Each Other by Working Together.”

“OK, the artist John is here, please take some markers (or crayons). The writer Mary needs a good pen, the cutting expert is ready and prepared with his scissors….” etc.

And thus the whole team begins working together on finishing their first photo-book project: “The Celebration of Thanksgiving.”

The Thanksgiving photo-book may include the following pictures:

1. Making Thanksgiving Cards for friends and relatives (learning new skills)
2. Short simple description of Thanksgiving Holiday (learning new information and concepts)
3. Picture of the correct way of setting table, because the Thanksgiving Dinner is the most important feature of that Holiday (learning new skills)
4. Demonstration of saying “Thanks” (social skills)
5. Picture of “Thanksgiving Family meal” (fun and enjoyment of being together)
6. Picture of working on Photo-book as a team (collaboration and communication)
Summary of Therapeutic Phase

In this final phase of the project, the Leaders have a therapeutic intent. They are focused in this phase on the goal of shaping positive behavior along with learning new skills. They emphasize responsibility and serious work, yet continue to use indirect motivation, yet their approach is the most demanding that it has been during the entire project.

We presented the ideas of the meaning of celebration and why a table should be set carefully and decoratively. As we ate the celebratory meal, we presented the idea of giving thanks and invited discussion on this topic. In an indirect way, we were more demanding of the participants, having increased our expectations of proper behavior and the demonstration of higher order skills. In this way, we intended to stretch the participants’ skill set and push for their ability to verbalize their awareness of what they had learned. At the conclusion of this phase, the leaders orchestrated a complex set of collaborative skills among the participants so that they could take rightful pride of accomplishment in the creation of a meaningful photo-book.

Summary & Discussion

Using the theme of “Thanksgiving,” we have, in three distinct stages, used photo activities to create a sequence of activities that help the participants learn healthy behavior as a collaborative exercise. In this way, we help to create a healthy community of people who are beginning to appreciate the value of their position in a group of people.

The choice of theme for such an integrated therapeutic photo-activity is quite open. The profession of the person in the “Producer” role may be quite varied. The main qualification is the ability to visualize the value of the project and the requisite skills to interact constructively with their client population.

The use of the camera and picture taking in this program has extended previously published accounts of photo activities into a synthesis that leads to an integrated positive expression that may have educational value for an audience, whether it be parents, the community, or prospective participants in future programs.
The further development of the program

It is quite possible to alter the program to accommodate different themes and populations. It is also possible to extend the program, to engage in activities that further develop the abilities of the participants involved. What follows is a discussion of the possibilities for such further development.

The Direction of Development

One of the goals of the program is to gradually shift responsibility for initiative onto the participants. In pursuing the additional activities described below, the leadership of the Producer and Photographer gradually diminishes as the participants assume more of the initiative. To do so, the Producer makes more demands upon the participants, expects more involvement from them, and puts more responsibility onto the participants in suggesting themes, creating short photostories, etc. Similarly, the Photographer involves more people in the picture taking process, encourages any sign of initiative, creativity or independent thinking. This transfer of responsibility can be reflected also in noting the participant’s authorship of the products of the activities. Ideally, the program would come to be run by the participants themselves, with the Producer and Photographer serving more in the roles of resource personnel rather than active facilitators.

Introducing Photodrama

An important addition to our program would be the introduction of photodrama. For example, we might repeat the Thanksgiving meal, this time, however, staging it in an imaginary restaurant, where some participants are restaurant’s workers who should set the table and another participants are the customers who should know how to behave properly, make a right order, pay the bill. All the while, the Photographer is taking pictures of the scenes.

As part of the Leaders’ giving more responsibility to the participants, they would encourage them to think of roles, or actions that they might like to play, or which scenes, or moments should be photographed.

The Leaders can continue to introduce interventions, such as casting certain participants in certain roles, or to engage in certain behaviors, for therapeutically strategic reasons. A timid girl, for example, we might assign the role of a queen who might boss people around, giving orders and demanding
that people listen to her. A person who likes to boss others around, we might cast
in the role of a servant, so he or she might experience what it feels like when
somebody gives you orders or commands you around the room. A person with
bad posture could be directed to carry him or herself with great dignity, or have
pictures taken while this person assumes certain poses, so he or she could view
themselves when standing erect or with good posture.

Holiday themes suggest stories that can be enacted. Jewish holidays, for
example, are rich with such stories. Many of these stories have both good and
bad characters. Having the participants play these characters in a photodrama
can be directed with good therapeutic benefit, with later discussion of what
makes for good and bad human qualities.

Adapting Themes to Populations

The Thematic Photo-Book Program can be modified by choosing special
themes for different kinds of population. The content of photoactivities may vary
from the simplest to the very complicated, depending on the participant’s level of
development.

For non-verbal participants, for example, "The language of Images" could
work as an excellent support process for developing improved communication
and understanding. The variety of ways to use photoactivities creatively to help
population with Special needs in different areas of life is endless.

Using a theme of "Daily Living Skills" would be very useful for a
population with special needs who are on their road to independence. A photo-
book program on such a theme could be an excellent method for such a
population to reach some important goals To teach them the necessary skills, a
program might involve the participants in different kinds of games. In this
manner, we can simultaneously achieve some behavioral skill goals while also
developing their imagination and creativity, and enhancing better
communication.

Consider the activity we can call "Shopping spree." This game is about
shopping. The necessary life skills could be learned in the an imaginary
department store environment, with a variety of props to suggest items for sale,
price tags, the roles of cashier, salesperson and customers. Skills such as choosing
an item, waiting in line, paying money and getting a change could be learned in
a fun relaxed way with the photographs providing an opportunity to review the
experience later, such as preparatory to an outing to a real store. As anyone who
has worked with children know, these imaginary scenarios become very real in
the minds of youngsters and can function as reality therapy.
In an imaginary "Beauty salon" we can learn about combing hair, brushing teeth, dressing properly, matching cloths, etc. In the "Restaurant we can learn about setting the table, table manners (using utensils, pouring juice, etc. In an imaginary Laundromat, we can learn the skills of doing laundry in proper way. Photographing the activities and making photo-books from the pictures provides a learning opportunity to further reinforce the learning that occurs during the photo-drama itself.

Some themes could be the topic for an entire photo-book program. Such a program can last for the whole year, and might consist anywhere from a set of separate photo-books describing different skills or one big book about the overall theme. Besides a theme on daily living skills, there could also be themes such as "traveling," or "cooking," to explore other aspects of independent living. Holidays are an especially good source of themes. Jewish holidays in particular provide opportunities for many useful photo-dramas. Therapeutic and cultural goals can be achieved simultaneously with such holiday themes. Every Jewish holiday has story to tell, a lot of helpful and interesting information and learning concepts. They are very rich with imagery and deep with meaning. A Jewish Holidays Photo-Book program could be conducted and used on many different levels of meaning. The stories surrounding these holidays contain spiritual messages, moral lessons, as well as guides to daily living. Depending on the level of development of the participants, the same Holiday can be explored at most any layer of depth and meaning. Such a program might also be so constructed that it could provide levels of understanding and skills to allow for a participant to progress from one level to the next. Such holiday programs can be a source joy and fun, as well as educational and therapeutic.

The Value of the Moment

To create little plays/scenes and perfect them in front of a camera is a great therapeutic/educational value. Still photography has a certain advantage over moving pictures (such as a video) because of capturing that special moment. The photograph freezes that moment for later inspection, discussion and learning. The still photograph invites the study of details.

For those participants who operate a camera during the program, learning to push the button at just the right moment trains them in attention. It builds a special connection between paying attention, having awareness of what is valuable and relevant, and translating that into quick and decisive behavior.
References


* Dina Veksler, ADPP, a photo-specialist, initiated the therapeutic and expressive photo activity applications in this article and conducted the scholarly research.
** Henry Reed, Ph.D., a licensed professional counselor (retired) specializing in expressive arts therapy, prepared the first draft of this article.