Contemporary Media Forum

The Psychotherapeutics of Online Photosharing

Advocates of phototherapy and therapeutic photography have emphasized the effectiveness of creating and viewing photographs as a process of self-insight and personal change (Krauss & Fryrear, 1983; Phillips, 2000; Weiser, 1999). While "phototherapy" involves a professional psychotherapist who encourages clients to work with their personal snapshots within the framework of formal therapy, "therapeutic photography" consists of photo-based activities that are conducted by the individual as a form of self-help (Weiser, 2009). Both endeavors are based on the same assumption: photographic images provide an interpretive media through which the unconscious can express itself more directly than by words alone. 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 (Suler, 1996). Many forms of art and expressive therapy are based on these same assumptions, although, as Weiser (2009) points out, art therapy involves visual creations constructed from memory and imagination, while phototherapy and therapeutic photography rely on the capture of scenes in the external world.

With the advent of digital photography, the evolution of these therapeutic activities has reached a new stage. Digital photography has not only made it easy for almost anyone to take and share photos, but image editing programs like Photoshop have enabled even laypeople to drastically modify and combine their photographic images in ways never before imagined, which moves therapeutic photography much closer to therapeutic art.

The Internet took the evolution even one step further. It enabled people from all walks of life around the world to share their photographic images with each other, often in ways that encourage self-insight, mutual support, and personal change. As such, the traditional support group and mutual-aid movement, which began in the 1960s as a grass roots phenomenon and then transitioned into cyberspace in the 1990s as text-based discussion boards and email groups, has now taken the uniquely new form of self-help groups in which people communicate through a fluid combination of text and visual images. All of these changes inspired by digital photography and cyberspace encourage a fresh approach to understanding the creation, sharing, and reaction to visual images, which I call "Photographic Psychology" (Suler, 2009a).

Flickr, one of the largest online photo-sharing communities with over 20 million members and three billion images, consists of thousands of groups devoted to a wide variety of topics concerning photography, politics, vocations, health, hobbies, and almost any other issue one can imagine. Dozens of groups have formed to address psychological and mental health issues. Some groups are large, consisting of many thousands of members; others are small, with just a handful. People submit photos from their personal "photostreams" to the group pool where other members can see thumbnail versions of the images, click on them, and then link to the original full size photo in the person's photostream. They also can talk with each other in a discussion board that appears below the photo. The conscious and unconscious psychological dynamics of these *Flickr* groups have evolved into a complex interaction of imagistic, verbal, and action-based communication (Suler, 2008).

GROUPS DEVOTED TO PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

The emergence of *Flickr* groups devoted to mental health issues provide a unique opportunity for people experiencing a particular psychological problem to come together in order to share and discuss their photography. The resulting groups resemble those of traditional self-help/support organizations, with the exception that images, and therefore therapeutic photography, become the central focus of the group dynamics. Groups have been dedicated to such issues as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, borderline personality disorders, dissociative identity disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, self-harm, suicide, stress, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

The boundaries of some of these groups are questionable as to how well they provide a therapeutic environment in the traditional sense. Some are quite large, with people continually joining, leaving, and participating sporadically. Minimal rules or procedures are required by most groups, with the exception of a few that prohibit the posting of images that might be triggers for self-harm. Anyone in *Flickr*, and in fact anyone on the Internet, can view the images unless the group or the individual member restricts access. No doubt these factors affect the level of trust and sharing that occurs.

Although members of the entire group can view a photo that is submitted and then participate in the discussion board beneath it, usually smaller informal subgroups of people develop over time in these discussions. The entire group simply provides an environment for these like-minded people to initially discover each other. These informal subgroups tend to be more cohesive and personally meaningful to their members than the group as a whole. They develop as a result of conscious, unconscious, and transference resonance that draws these people to each other. In discussion boards devoted to the entire group, members do engage in some personal exchanges and self-disclosing about their psychological issues, usually when they first introduce themselves to the group. However, most

ongoing discussions occur within the informal subgroups that gather in the individuals' photostreams.

THE THERAPEUTIC POWER OF THE IMAGE

Compared to the text-only support groups in cyberspace, there is considerably less verbal discussion in these support systems in *Flickr*. Instead, the images acquire therapeutic power as a vehicle of self-expression and interpersonal influence. Many people, especially those invested in the artistic aspects of photography, describe how the visual aspects of their world are important to them, and how they try to capture it in their photography. The image is a way to represent memories of what is important in one's life, to shape personal meaning, and to express ideas, experiences, and emotions that may not be easily verbalized. The image is an extension of one's identity – a kind of transitional or transformational space, or an intersubjective field, as described in the theories of object relations and self psychology. The image might express the unconscious dimensions of one's character. It might be a self-representation created by the person, an experiment that gives expression to some underlying anxiety, wish, or ideal. A person establishes a relationship to that image as a means to relate to some emerging aspect of his or her identity. Providing a concrete visual form for the dynamics of one's personality enables a sense of master over those dynamics.

For all of these reasons, the sequence of images in a person's photostream acquires a specific visual and thematic style, distinct from those of other members, whether the person consciously intends this or not. The spread of subject matters and visual styles from one person's photostream to another reflects the influence they have on each other, often on an unconscious level.

The uploading of images to *Flickr* is an act of going public with the visual shaping of oneself. It is a process of making the intrapersonal interpersonal. Sharing one's photography becomes a process of validation in which others understand the personal meaning and facets of identity that the photographer embedded in the image. Knowing others can see it therefore gives it more emotional power. The photo, as well as the aspects of self it represents, feel more real. As in art therapy, the process of creating an image can be therapeutic in itself – a process of self-insight, emotional catharsis, the working through of conflicts, and the affirmation of identity. Going public with the image enhances that process.

Although it is possible that some members of these informal groups influence each other by images alone, relationships usually evolve in a more synergistically powerful way via the combination of images and words. It is the exchange of words between a photographer and a particular visitor that establishes their mutually recognized presence to each other. These text discussions launch their relationship and the joint understanding of shared meanings. Images provide an undercurrent of emotion and ideas that enrich interpersonal dynamics, often on a level that is not fully conscious or capable of being verbalized; but verbal

communication among people provide the more deliberate social efforts to develop their relationship.

AVENUES FOR RESEARCH

While browsing the collection of photos in a *Flickr* group, you may find yourself fascinated by the wide variety of images as well as by the subtle patterns that surface upon closer inspection. For example, while visiting one of the depression groups that contains many thousands of photos, I studied pages in the collection one at a time, each consisting of 30 images. On the first page I noticed mostly self-portraits of younger people looking directly into the camera, with neutral or ambiguous expressions. There were bodies in positions that looked uncomfortable, distressed, or contorted; several images of pills submitted by one person; pictures of a dog, two dead insects, a woman's lips. Although a few of the images were black and white, monochrome, or processed in a graphic style, most looked like ordinary color snapshots.

Randomly selecting another page further back in the collection, I now saw mostly self-portraits by young women, several of them by the same person, with neutral, thoughtful, or slightly benign expressions, and one tense smile. There was a series of surreal shots of a man in a field holding costume rabbit ears; a series showing homeless and other street people; ambiguously dark images of chicks and dogs; women drinking and smoking; a shot of a notepad indicating money owed to a phone company; pills precariously balanced on the lips of a head tilted backwards. Whereas a few shots on this page showed evidence of sophisticated photography equipment and subtle image processing skills, most had a raw, from-the-gut, high contrast and colorful presentation of spontaneously artistic snapshot photography.

In the personal photostreams of the people contributing these images to the depression group, I found a series of photos depicting aspects of their everyday lives: friends, family, pets, scenes related to work and hobbies, just as you might find in any *Flickr* member's photostream. However, for some depression group members, the sequence of ordinary photos were occasionally interrupted by startling images of wounds to arms and legs, or hands wrapped in bloody tissues, that illustrated episodes of cutting.

These excursions into the *Flickr* groups convinced me of the rich opportunities for research in these online communities, not just to provide insight into the therapeutic photography and online photosharing, but perhaps also into the very nature of psychological disorders. For example, why is it that of all the groups devoted to a wide variety of psychological conditions, those for depression, bipolar disorders, and suicide contain, by far, the largest number of members and images? Might visual processing somehow play an important role in their cognitive and emotional functioning, or might people inclined towards these problems tend to benefit more from imagistic expression than people with other psychological disorders?

Answers to these questions might lie in case studies of the people frequently participating in these groups, who can be identified readily by perusing the group's images or by the fact that *Flickr* lists the top five contributors. The unique quality of people's photostreams that are visual journals of identity and lifestyle; the ongoing text discussions accompanying the images; the titles, descriptions, and keyword tags people create for their photos; the profile descriptions they present about themselves; the testimonials visitors might write about a particular photographer – all can be rich sources of information.

Researchers might also use some of the other features built into the *Flickr* community as tools in their projects, such as the number of times an image is viewed or chosen as a "favorite" by visitors, which estimates its psychological impact on people. Photo titles, descriptions, and keyword tags within a group or *Flickr* as a whole can be scanned by a search engine in order to locate different types of images. *Flickr* also provides data about the most frequently used tags by a particular person as well as the top five tags for a group. Might researchers, for example, find it valuable to know that the most common tags for the depression groups are such words as art, abstract, selfportrait, me, self, black, black&white, dark, blue, abandoned, sad, worried, love, light, woman, eyes, and face?

Researchers might also consider different strategies for categorizing and analyzing the psychotherapeutic images in these online groups. They could apply principles from the Rorschach about the meaning of such perceptual elements as color, shading, texture, movement, and form quality. They might employ a classification and identification system based on such factors as subject matter, imaging tools and techniques, visual elements, and psychological/emotional content (Suler, 2009b). No doubt, any research project will benefit from an understanding of how the language of composition and visual design intersects with what psychoanalytic theory has taught us about the language of unconscious primary process, including symbolism, metaphor, condensation, and emotional/ideational association.

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