

# Photography – a powerful tool in Solution Focused use

**Marika Tammeaid**

## Abstract

*One of the key issues in SF work is to make the future perfect strong and vibrant. Every SF coach knows how useful metaphors and pictures can be in this work. In addition to writing and drawing, photography provides an inspirational and productive tool for client work. This article presents a number of ways to use photography in SF coaching and teaching with both individuals and groups. Pre-existing photographs and taking new photos can be effectively used to enhance self-reflection and learning. Photography can make the future perfect tangible and real – in a genuine way.*

## Dialogical photography

**A**lthough cameras are fairly familiar objects for most of us, our attitude towards photography is worth considering. What kind of relationship do we have with photos? What kind of photographers are we? How does it feel to be in front of the camera – do we feel comfortable or uneasy being photographed?

Traditionally there is a tendency to view photos as the output of the photographer's artistic view and technical skill – a way for the person taking pictures to express himself – with only superficial regard for the people being photographed. This may be why, in my experience, roughly one in ten people have bad memories, or even a fear, of being photographed.

Miina Savolainen, a Finnish photographer and social educator, has developed another method called empowering photography (Savolainen, 2008), which centres on the person

Address for correspondence: Marika Tammeaid, Finsight, P.O.Box 1282, FIN-00101 Helsinki

in front of the camera. According to Savolainen, the first principle empowering photography is ensuring that the person being photographed is not an object in the photographer's lens, but rather the main character. That requires switching the power position around and following dialogical and appreciating principles during photo sessions. This approach firmly leads the photographer to ask questions like:

- what kind of a person is there in front of me?
- how does he/she want to look at himself/herself?
- what is unique and beautiful in him/her?
- how does he/she want to be photographed?
- how can I help him/her to see himself/herself as good and valuable?
- how can I carefully listen and take photos in an encouraging and appreciating way?
- how can I communicate the good I see with my presence, voice, gestures and words?
- how can I make the best inner qualities of the person come through in the photograph?

Dialogical and empowering photography shares the same values with SF and is a great tool for taking better, real and meaningful photos that help people positively narrate their lives, feel better and crystallise what is important to them. Dialogical photography also helps people open up and join the (working) community, make better use of their skills and abilities, and overall feel happier and healthier. When people in working communities start taking photos of each other in this way, a certain lightness and playfulness is developed. This in turn, helps people put a proper perspective on their work and colleagues and understand what is truly important to themselves and others.

An appreciative and dialogical photo session can be a healing experience for those of us with negative photo experiences or insecurities about our appearance. It is also a gentle way for all of us to look at ourselves anew – since we're all getting older anyway. The camera is also a great tool for

working with people who are not comfortable expressing themselves verbally. Furthermore, since there is a technical aspect in photography, it helps certain people participate better in the development of the working community.

### **Photographs in therapeutic use**

According to the Canada-based Phototherapy Centre ([www.phototherapy-centre.com](http://www.phototherapy-centre.com)), using photos “as means of education and amusement” is as long as the history of photography itself. A more congruent therapeutic usage of photography started in the 1970s within the fields of psychotherapy and art therapy and, later on, within counselling. The therapeutic use of photos includes photos taken by the client, of the client, and taking self-portraits as well as using family albums or symbolic photos in client work.

Phototherapeutic traditions tend to be tightly linked to formal psychodynamic therapy where the key question is “why”, and where a lot of attention is put on hard times and painful memories of the client’s personal/family history (see the Phototherapy Europe handbook *Learning and Healing with Phototherapy*, 2011). This is where empowering photography in SF use differs greatly from the older tradition of photo therapy/therapeutic photography.

The common feature in empowering photography and the older tradition is seeing photography as an active tool and communication rather than art (Weiser, 2008). The actual value of any photograph lies less in its visual appearance and more in its ability to evoke emotions and serve as a tool for growth and development.

By definition, empowerment contributes to competence and success. The philosophical roots of empowering photography can be found in dialogical philosophy, for example in Martin Buber’s distinction between the I-Thou relationship and the I-It relationship, first published in German in 1923 (Buber, 1937). Without the SF touch, empowering photography can easily stop in analysis or phenomenology. SF highlights the intentional side of human action and self-understanding.

‘Intention becomes meaningful through action’, says Buber. By portraying the values and objectives of our lives, we constantly re-frame the past, present and future – and actively create the preferred future.

### **How is work portrayed in photos?**

When working with organisations, it is interesting to notice that people tend not to have pictures of their work. And if they have work photos, they tend to be of special occasions such as parties, conferences, travel etc. It can be a surprisingly new and useful exercise to take photos of an ordinary day or week at work – after all, it’s where we tend to spend most of our waking hours. Visualising everyday work (and those who do it) through photos can be both empowering and revealing. For example, it might be an interesting exercise to explore how the vision, mission, values and processes of the organisation become visible in everyday pictures – or do they?

Important questions to work on can be:

- who are we? what kind of unique strengths do we base our work on?
- are all of us present in the photos?
- how are important goals and values portrayed in everyday life at work?
- what carries us further in difficulties?
- what do I want to strengthen and make visible in my life and work at the moment?
- what is meaningful to me, as an individual?
- what is valuable and important for us, together?

Old photos also provide a pathway to the past of the group or an organisation. In some situations they are a treasure box to make the change visible or to revisit old strengths for new uses. Looking at old pictures collectively tells a great deal about how people narrate their past. In photo sessions it is important to look purposefully for those photos that are the empowering pieces of the years gone by.

When working with photos there is also an opportunity to interact between current and former selves or other people, now gone, but present in the photos. All that can positively contribute to re-narrating “my story”, exploring the sparkling moments, getting the feeling of the long span even in present difficulties, and revealing a polyphonic version of the past. For example, looking at important photos from the beginning of one’s career has for several clients brought back the sparkle that has been missing at work. Discovering that which is good, valuable and meaningful for oneself at work and in life, is a very powerful process that leads to new insights into personal goals and one’s relationship to work.

### **New self-portraits**

One thing SF practice can learn from empowering photography is the art of new self-portraits – photos that make the individual strengths, resources, future perfect and dreams visible – or the miracle tangible. It is up to the client to decide what is the right place and time for the self-portrait session. A special place, clothing, objects or other people may be needed to get it right. The only important thing is to respect the client’s wants and needs. What does he want to portray in the photo? What does he want to strengthen in himself and his life? What is important to him?

The photographer’s task is to adhere to the other person’s view so that the result is truly a self-portrait – even if the person in question does not technically snap the photo. Taking this kind of photo is a true moment of appreciative interaction and co-creation. For work communities, it is an extremely powerful exercise of communication to take self-portraits in pairs. It is a good way to make visible how we look at ourselves and others. It is also an excellent tool to practice dialogical, two-way interactions between colleagues. These processes keep reminding us how different we all are and that you can never know what is truly empowering for another person.

When taking new self-portraits with groups of future SF

coaches, it has been interesting to see the different results and different uses of the photos. Some have taken photos that remind them of an important aspect of client work and have hung them where they work. Others have portrayed successful client cases, the “right” coaching attitude they want to hold on to, or a leap they want to take.

### **Focusing on the good and valuable**

We always make choices when focusing our attention on something. Doing that in a concrete way with the help of a camera’s lens makes our choices very clear. It’s the same choice we make every time we look at photos, our own or someone else’s. Therefore, using photos actively as part of SF dialogue in any setting helps us to reach areas that are less consciously evident or verbally accessible.

A photo is also a strong tool for reflection because it evokes feelings – also in physical form. When looking at an old photo, we can experience again some of the feelings we had at that particular moment. This can also happen with others’ photos. John Berger (2001) has described the uniqueness of the reflective subject of a photograph. There are three: protagonist, photographer and viewer. For all of them, photography provides a possibility to structure life and add something important to one’s own story.

In our mind, different time zones live together, not as a timely continuum. A photograph has the power to tie fibres from different time zones together. A photo is genuine and real, yet at the same time distant enough that you can play with it. With the right photo, we can build new synaptic connections to rehearse things that have not yet happened.

In summary, photography is a good tool to strengthen what is worth strengthening. Photography can give structure to our feelings and aspirations, the things we remember in the past and the future, and meanings we share. I have begun to see that, when working with individuals and teams, photography is a shortcut to the important things. It allows us to focus effectively on what is essential and valuable in everyday life and work.

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**Marika Tammeaid** M.Soc.Sc is a coach, counsellor and trainer teaching SF at Palmenia Centre for Continuing Education (Helsinki University), working as Development Manager at the Ministry of Finance and studying Empowering Photography at Aalto University of Arts and Design. E-mail: [marika.tammeaid@finsight.fi](mailto:marika.tammeaid@finsight.fi)