

# PHOTOLANGUAGE© : A METHOD FOR USE WITH GROUPS IN A THERAPY OR TRAINING CONTEXT

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this special issue is to provide information to the reader about how a Photolanguage© session actually works. Before presenting the setting and its specific features, a few words about the origin of the method and a presentation of the working medium, the Photolanguage© photograph portfolios.*

**Key Words:** *group, Photolanguage, mediating object.*

## **The origins of Photolanguage©**

The Photolanguage© method was created in 1965 by a group of psychologists and psychosociologists working with teenagers in Lyon. In a totally intuitive way at first, they came up with the idea of using photographs as a activator for the spoken word with young people who had trouble expressing themselves, particularly speaking in front of a group about their various and sometimes painful personal experiences. The first photographs used were black-and-white prints taken by various photographers. To the amazement of the conductors of these first groups, suddenly there was more verbal give-and-take and group members freely participated in the talk with obvious spontaneity and mutual interest. It was clear that group members could take pleasure in listening to each other. Soon after, the same method was applied in the field of adult education, where Photolanguage© continues to be used most frequently, both in the workplace and in the community, in France as well as in other countries. The comments made by adult education trainers or group conductors about using the method indicate its tremendous usefulness. In any case, they all say that they particularly appreciate using the method when starting up a new group or when winding up work with a group (using Photolanguage© as an evaluation technique).

In addition to the above-mentioned fields and contexts in which Photolanguage© is normally used, it is in the area of therapy that we have concentrated on applying this method, with a group of clinical psychologists who have worked together in Lyon for over 15 years. A growing number of groups, co-conducted by clinical psychologists and psychiatric nurses, have been set up for troubled teenagers, psychopathic patients, drug addicts, psychotic patients, and senior citizens, in various settings such as psychiatric hospitals, out-patient facilities, health dispensaries, CATTPs , and prisons.

## **The main features of the setting**

In mental health therapy settings, the number of participants is from 5 to 8 patients, forming a group which meets weekly for an hour or for an hour and 15 minutes. In an adult education setting, a small group includes from 12 to 15 participants, meeting for at least 2 hours per session .

In an adult education context, one group conductor is needed for a small group and two for a large group (25 to 30 participants), whereas, when working with patients, the psychologist makes sure that two or three group conductors (psychologists, with either psychiatrist or a psychiatric nurse) always the same people, will share the responsibility for the continuity of the group's work. In the context of mental health care, the ratio of staff members to patients is proportionally higher.

Groups which meet weekly at a set place and time in an institutional setting have a therapeutic dimension, given that they meet regularly (with the exception of a few weeks per year, during summer vacation). This regular contact with the group enables staff members to prepare for each session, taking into account the way the group, the individual patients and the host institution itself are evolving. The time spent working out the question which will be asked the group the following week is particularly indicative of the attentiveness of group leaders to ensuring continuity in the progression of the group's associations and thinking.

All the people involved in therapy share a preoccupation with the diversity of the patients' pathologies. Some psychiatrists contribute to the therapy by prescribing participation in a Photolanguage© group as part of the program of therapy they have worked out for a patient. Obviously, in the interests of the successful functioning of group, there should be some patients who are capable of speaking with some degree of spontaneity along with those who have chronic mental illnesses and are therefore less capable of expressing themselves. In some institutions, patients with the same type of pathology are placed together; this is the case for alcoholics or drug addicts.

Each session begins with a question which has been carefully prepared beforehand by the group conductor. This question, asked to all the group-members, leads each one to choosing a particular photograph from a selection of photos presented to the group. The choice of the question is part of the setting. Over time, experience has allowed the different teams working on this project to refine and improve upon the exact wording and construction of the question and the degree of personal involvement it generates. At each weekly therapy session, the question is different. In training settings, the questions asked the group are designed to generate a progression in the group's work and also mark the main stages of the training program (beginning session, working sessions and final session).

Our experience has shown that the way the "The Question" is worded is the most subtle and tricky aspect of the setting, the one which requires the greatest attention and creativity, since this question, asked at the beginning of each session, should not be too direct, too long, nor too complicated.

The choice of the photographs used : the Photolanguage© method includes a set of very precise instructions and also a number of portfolios containing 40 black-and-white photographs. The photos are classified by theme. Until recently, the portfolios were available in retail bookstores. At present, those who wish to obtain these portfolios can contact the Photolanguage© method's founders and group conductors who use them very frequently in their work.

The Body and Communication, From Personal to Professional Choices, Health Care and Prevention Issues are among the most recent portfolios.

### **Testing and perfecting the portfolios**

We will now present the way group conductors select a limited number of photos among all those published and sold in bookstores under the name Photolanguage©. First, a few words about the way the portfolios are actually “ produced ” (on a modest scale), using an approach which is still fairly empirical. As an illustrative example, let’s take the most recently published portfolio, Health and Prevention Issues. It was originally designed for a number of our American colleagues who work with groups of AIDS patients; a request for a particular portfolio in fact often grows out of the need to address a specific medical and/or social issue.

Claire Bélisle is the originator of all the photo portfolios ; she has been the moving force behind all the different teams who have worked on perfecting them. The first stage of the work involves taking inventory of all the social and individual representations which can be explored, with the help of numerous experimental groups made up of volunteers interested in the subject. Brain-storming-type exchanges lead to the design of a typology of different representations. Then, starting with this typology, we look for original photographs, either in commercial phototheques or at photography exhibitions. The photos chosen are then used experimentally with new groups, as they would be used with a regular Photolanguage© therapy or training session, except that the volunteers are asked to fill out an additional questionnaire at the end of the session. Taking into account quantitative as well as qualitative replies to the questionnaire, we establish a list of the photos which are most often selected and the reasons why they are chosen, in relation to The Question asked by the group conductor. When 48 photos have been definitively selected for a Photolanguage© portfolio, copyrights are bought from the photographers and paper prints are made, using the techniques which will best reproduce the quality and texture of the original photographs. This is the last step before actual publication, which explains why several years may be necessary before a new Photolanguage© portfolio comes out.

### **How a session works**

A Photolanguage© session is composed of two parts :

- the first part : choosing the photos which will be used,
- the second part : verbal exchange among the members of the group,

### **The first part : choosing the photos**

After having stated The Question which launches the group session and leads up to the choice of a photograph by each group-member, the group conductor, careful to alternate different “types” of picture, places photos from the portfolio on tables. The tables are set up in such a way as to make it easy for group-members to walk around the room and to freely look at all the pictures, in no particular pre-ordained order. The group conductor remembers to make it clear at the outset that :

- The choice of a photo by each group member is made without any talking, in order to allow all the participants to think about and to make their choices.

- The choice is made first made “mentally”, i.e., only by looking at the photos rather than touching or picking them up, in order to leave them available to all the participants, since each person goes at his/her own speed.
- The group conductor will know that each participant has made his/her choice when he/she has moved away from the area where the tables are set up.
- It is important that participants not change their choices, even they realize that someone else happens to have already chosen the same photo, when he/she picks it up when asked to do so by the group conductor. If this should happen, the group conductor says to the person/people who have made the same choice: “ You’ll find your photo within the group. ”.

Group members are advised to really “get into” the photos they’re looking at, to look at them very attentively in order to become aware of those which “speak to them” the most. The group conductor explicitly says to the group, when giving all these instructions, that he himself/ she herself will also choose a photo and participate in the group’s exchanges, just as any other group member does. This comment is important for several reasons. The fact that the group conductor participates in the game by choosing his/her own photo is a specific feature of Photolanguage© sessions. In therapy contexts, this feature has a crucial influence on the way the work of the group is perceived by participating patients. Several years ago, I set forth the hypothesis that Photolanguage© groups “get off the ground” so quickly partially because the group leaders become involved, and, as a result, the participants immediately perceive the activity as not being as “ threatening ” as they had imagined. In addition, the group conductor’s personal involvement in the Photolanguage© activity greatly increases the opportunity for patients to identify with presiding staff-members, and to identify with the pleasure which the latter take in “playing”, i.e., making associations, then linking those associations through the process of thinking. It is easy to imagine the effect it has on the patient to realize that he/she has chosen the same photo as one of the group conductors and that, starting with the very same picture, each of them can express both similar and diverging viewpoints. The first part of the session (described above) is then followed by the second part (described below).

### **Exchanges among the members of the group**

The duration of the second part of the Photolanguage© session is limited by how much time remains after the first part and the participants are encouraged by the group conductor to share this period of time as a group. The group conductor says : “ *Each of us will show “his/her” photo when he/she feels like doing so, possibly in connection with something which has just been said by someone else. We’ll listen attentively to the person as he/she shows the others his/her photo. Although we won’t put forth any interpretations, in the psychoanalytical sense of the term, we are encouraged, after each presentation, to say what we ourselves see in the picture that is similar to or different from what was seen by the person who chose it.*”.

These instructions are most important, since they determine the distance between what is most similar and what is most different. The time devoted by each group-member to a spoken

commentary on the photo he/she has selected allows him/her to appropriate his/:her own choice and to hear himself/herself putting into words the characteristics of his/her own personal and unshakeable view of reality, as he/she perceives it. With this approach, there is a high degree of attentiveness on the part of all the group-members, as they listen to another participant talking about a photo. To go even further, it very often happens that the photographic medium and the impact of its symbolic elements make for a description which is close to “poetry”. This “poetic” dimension contributes to the shared pleasure of talking about and listening to others talk about the pictures. Each group-member is surprised at the discovery, via the words used by another person, of a whole new and creative vision, of a totally different way of looking at reality, of a viewpoint which appears to open up wide vistas to him/her. There is also the fact that other group-members who wish to do so take the floor to say something about a particular photo, thus contributing “links” to the chain of thought-associations. A person who listens to others talking about “his”/“her” photo perceives the playing area between the photo which is “his”/“hers” (and which has even become to some extent “him ”/“ her ”), in that it represents his/her choice --- and yet is not completely “him/her” since it is still really “just” a picture.

Each participant identifies to a greater or lesser extent with the photo he/she has chosen, but even more so with what the others say about the picture; the way the other group-members look at his/her photo has a considerable influence on the way he/she will perceive it. In some cases, just the opposite happens and a patient violently expresses the death instinct towards another person. On other occasions, no matter what the exchanges and associations concerning a particular photo may have been, the person who has chosen it forcefully expresses the unshakeable nature of his/her own perception, the constancy of his/her representation, which we definitely sense is linked to the “anchoring” of the affect to the sensory perception of the image. In this case (and nothing can be done to change it), the way the photo is held, handled and kept close to the person bears witness to the attachment that the subject feels towards “ his ”/“ her ” picture (and here the possessive is not a mere stylistic detail). Added to all the above-mentioned aspects is the almost inexpressible specificity of the Photolanguage© method, which generates an enjoyment derived from exchanging with others, from being part of a group, from functioning mentally and from thinking. This method greatly facilitates each participant’s ability to speak in front of the group, helps him/her to exist as a subject, provides a backup for his/her own thinking and creativity, and also provides a favourable context for interpersonal exchanges, particularly for production of imaginary elements by individuals and/or by the group, thus encouraging cross-identifying exchanges.

### **The specific features of the Photolanguage© method**

Photolanguage©’s special features concern both *the various aspects of the setting and the processes which take place within the group.*

As concerns the setting, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the method is that the group conductor asks the group a question (which we call “The Question”), which he asks the group to answer with the help of the photographs subsequently chosen by each group

member. This aspect is essential, since it defines a playing area between the “mobilization” of thinking in the form of ideas, logical thought, which is organised and *rendered secondary for the purpose of answering a question*, on one side, and, on the other side, the “mobilization” of thinking in images, which causes the subject to react via associations, starting from his/her own internalized images and the affects which accompany them, according to the analogy or rather the “ana-logic” of the primary process. The perimeter of this playing area is thus very well-defined, to the extent that the setting establishes the limitations of the group’s work, both for thinking in ideas and for thinking in images. This aspect of the method is very important, in that it defines strict limitations for working within the framework of the instructions given by the group conductor, since the setting is immediately internalized by the participants.

This distinctive feature of the method has two major effects on the way a Photolanguage© session unfolds. On one hand, there is an obvious *containing effect*, given the sturdiness of what I often call “*the two guard-rails*” : on one side, The Question, on the other side, the photograph. In addition, the playing area thus defined is organized between the primary process (thinking in pictures) and the secondary process (thinking in ideas). The conditions of the game reside in the space between the two “guard-rails” thereby set up, constituting a real playing area. Within this area, each of the participants will also have the option of commenting on a photo chosen by another person, keeping in mind that everyone has The Question in mind when he/she talks about a photograph, whether his/her “own” picture or one chosen by another person. This playing area, which is situated in an intermediate ground between the primary process and the secondary process is favourable to linking the two above-mentioned processes, ensuring a dual articulation between subjective psychic reality and inter-subject reality.

Now let us look in more detail at the nature of the processes specifically called into play by this type of setting. My clinical experience of group therapy using the Photolanguage© method will illustrate my remarks. With this technique, the mediating object is the photograph chosen by each member of the group, starting with The Question asked the group by the group conductor at the beginning of the session.

So, for example, a woman participant, showing the group a photograph of a house in the country, talks about vacations spent with her grandmother when she was a little girl. This particular house reminds her that her grandmother always put bouquets of lavender in her linen closets; she remembers that she loved this scent, which she smelled every time her grandmother opened the creaking doors of her linen closets. Then and there, all of us in the group are captivated by this visual , auditory and olfactory memory.

There is no doubt that this is what Sigmund Freud conceived of in 1900 with the term representation of thing, a more faithful translation being “thing-representation”. The “thing” involved here is the mental image and the affect, situated somewhere between the body and the instinct. This is why I choose to use the word “image”, not only because the mediation to which I refer here is based on photographic images, but also because the sensorial image, be it in the form of a pictogram as in the theory of P. Aulagnier (1975) or that of a formal signifier



(Anzieu, 1987), is, as Freud himself said, the thinking mode which is closest to unconscious processes. To summarize, “thinking in images” as he calls it in (The Ego and the Id) (1923), is thinking whose representational modes are rooted in sensorially-perceived experience. We refer here to perceptual and sensorial “anchors”, which are integral parts of what can be termed the body’s “memory”.

Coming back to my preceding example, what rapidly appears to us to be the most important aspect of this simple scene from a little girl’s childhood, and which is still part of the adult talking to us about it, is without a doubt all that is rooted in the affects which accompany this chain of perceptions. Are image and affect indissolubly linked? How can we help but notice every time a participant tells us that only one of the photographs really “spoke” to him/her, that it isn’t he/she who chose the picture, but that the photo “chose” him/her: “It stood out from all the others”, and yet he/she frequently adds: “I don’t really know why (I chose it) ... I didn’t know what I could say about it”. When a photograph “chooses” us, it is no longer just a picture which has been taken by a particular photographer to capture a particular moment in time, at a given period, with all the objective data which the photograph can denote, as bearing witness to a certain reality. When a photograph “speaks” to us, “grabs” us, “chooses” us, it is because it has become an image; therefore, for us it is capable of connoting something much different than a mere historical or socio-cultural fragment of reality. The photograph gets us thinking, brings to mind a scenario, provides a “metaphor” for completely different situations, reminds us of a memory through analogy, or sometimes brings back an emotionally-charged atmosphere. A photo which is chosen as a mediating object becomes, through the personal involvement of the viewer, an image capable of “mobilizing” our own inner images, associated and linked by underlying affects. So each of us is asked to present his/her our picture to the group, and de facto, we are also asked to reveal our own inner images, while others look us in the eye. By means of this mediating object, I do not refer to myself directly, as would be the case with a group in therapy with no mediating object; I talk about myself “through” a photograph, which becomes a starting point, and about what I see in it through my personal associations. The others listen to me, they have seen the photo I’ve chosen; it had either “spoken” to them to some extent or hadn’t “said” a thing to them. My presentation of the photo allows them to become familiar with my point of view. Then, in turn, they will have the possibility of saying what they feel after listening to me talk about the picture. When they express their feelings about “my” picture, they will talk about themselves, and also to some extent about me, but without even realizing it. Their different impressions will expose me to different sets of inner images, which are opposite to mine or which support and feed into and amplify my own. The group will produce a shared set of images, made up of the multiple facets each participant possesses within himself/herself. and various images which belong to us individually or as a group will be set up, ordered and gradually evolve in the course of the session. We often hear such comments from group members as: “That’s true, I hadn’t seen things that way; now I see my picture in a somewhat different way”. We know very well that the photograph itself hasn’t changed; however what has changed are the inner images, those which come from our thinking in images, images which have been attained, touched and “mobilized” on the side of the primary process, and which, as a result, have brought about a

change in the general atmosphere, in the affective “mood” of the group session.

If thinking in images is closer to the unconscious, what can be said about the psychic realities brought into play in the course of these sessions? Every time we provide a mediating object, we call on the set of inner images to which we must assign a psychic space. In our Pre-conscious, inner images are deployed, express themselves and “produce”. From a topical point of view, the Pre-conscious has the particularity of possessing a side which is close to the subconscious, expressing itself according to modes of representation specific to the primary process, that is “thinking in images”, and that it has a side which is close to the Conscious, which, prior to 1920, Freud called the Pre-conscious-Consciousness system, which expresses itself according to the modes of the secondary process. The bipolar nature of the Pre-conscious is what makes it so rich : the potentiality of being a transit area, i.e., a transitional or intermediary space for exchanges, exchanges of inner images which are expressed and deployed thanks to each subject’s intermediary representations as well as those of the group.

The photograph has attained the status of an image. Images are the component parts of a certain set of inner images, and the affects which accompany these images will allow us to reach still another dimension.

For indeed, underlying that which is produced by inner images and within it, are other psychic “productions” which are, by their very essence, unconscious : fantasies, fantasies whose origin is unconscious, primal fantasies around which psychic reality is organized. Thus, fantasies of seduction, of castration and of primal scenes are played out within the group, through the intermediary of the photographs and what is said about them. The group conductor will talk about that fact, but without calling on the interpretations traditionally associated with psychoanalysis. Instead, he/she will participate, just as any other group member does, choosing a photo, allowing himself/herself to say what he/she sees in the photos chosen and presented by the other participants, limiting himself/herself to saying what he/she sees in each one, just as the others do.

The comments we make about the photo chosen by another person have real interpretive value, and it is not uncommon to feel the violent nature of an interpretive counter-comment, in our refusal to see what another person has seen in “our own” photo. A case in point: a woman violently refused the viewpoint of another participant, who saw a dead child in the desert in the photo which, for her, was a child sleeping peacefully on the hot sand of a beach in the summertime. Our respective inner images collide, in that they carry instincts within them, those of life and of death. So, are our inner images simply revealed content, as if memories, experiences, and the personal history of each person were the basis of his/her inner images, like an unchangeable store of images, forever marked with the seal of Eros or of Thanatos, indelibly imprinted on our psychic functioning ?

Through the use of mediating techniques like that of Photolanguage©, we learn that inner images do not only reveal themselves in terms of their content, but that they are also a psychic function. They are a function to the extent that they are transformed, they evolve, they change themselves because they have exchanged. From an “economic” point of view, when we exchange our inner images, we are exchanging not only instinctive impulses but also the



possibility that we may identify with each other. Any group using a mediation technique offers the subject an opportunity to encounter new identification models, through new givens that the other participants contribute, by diffraction, so to speak. Among the characters placed on stage, with a particular form and scenario, in the chain of associations produced by the group, the subject takes the part which belongs to him/her, and re-appropriates a bit of his/her own personal history and his/her inner psychic sense of “groupness”. Once they have passed through the intermediary of the inner images of the other group members, certain facets or images which were his/hers come back to the subject, “detoxified”, transformed, without any group member nor the whole group even being aware of it.

The object (the photograph), as the mediator, is a malleable medium and is able to transform inner images. It thereby contributes to favoring the integration of the inner images of each group-member. Thus, thanks to the photograph, the unconscious can become conscious. The object-mediator serves as an underpinning, a basis for projections, it supports the productions of individuals and of the group, it makes allowances for contradictions, it is neither me, nor the other person; it upholds both, it is a “third party” between the other and myself, an inter-mediator. The photograph is bipolar, between the subject and the object, the inside and the outside. There is also bipolarity between the side which is rooted in reality, materiality, visible, tangible, able to be picked up, held and handled and the side which is representational, “metaphorizing” another reality. Otherness places itself on the side of representivity, thanks to inter-subject linking, in that the photographic image is perceived in different ways, and “staged” starting from different narrative elements. The symbolic value of the object results from its two co-existing sides, materiality and representivity. In other words, the lack of symbolization is a lack of linking by thinking between that which is felt by the physical self, that which is perceived as being expressed in sensorial images, belonging exclusively to the primary process, to the representation of the thing, and putting it into words, demonstrating an ability to name what has been felt, using a verbal representation. The process of symbolization appears to be the result of psychic effort to establish links between the primary and secondary processes, through the intermediary of “tertiary processes”, a concept which was first put forward and subsequently developed by André Green.

The first phase of this psychic journey is containment of the realm of instinctive impulses, which threatens to make the subject “explode”, committing aggressive or violent actions or to make him/her “implode”, bringing about an inner disintegration, somatization or depression. First, the “receptacles” of thoughts must be reconstructed or restored, in order to contain impulses, urges, instinctive behavior, to channel them, to test the setting of the session, the group, which, though it may be attacked, will not be destroyed, thus reassuring the subject about the risks involved in his/her own destructive impulses.

It is easy to understand how the photograph, as the mediating object, can be a “receptacle” for verbal violence transposed onto the picture, which can be commented on in negative terms, criticized, demolished with words, without any one person feeling totally destroyed, since he/she continues to think that all that is really involved is only a photograph, even if

it is the one that he/she has chosen. One then realizes that the gap between the photo as an external object and the photo as an internal image, establishes a playing area. Here the game being played is “deadly serious”, for the photo, as an external object, acts as a “receptor” for the destructive impulses which are expressions of the death instinct.

Nevertheless, since it is still “ nothing but ” a photograph, it is not “destroyed”, and it deflects the instinctive impulse, which could have or should have been transferred onto another person. The subject thereby safeguards the photo-as-an-internal-image for himself/herself. He/She manages to do this all the better as the other members of the group have in turn put forward their own different representations, counterbalanced by the life instinct. His/Her inner image thus attains a greater degree of ambivalence, neither completely “fecalized”, nor idealized to an extreme, so he/she can re-appropriate it. Thus, the subject finds in the richness and the variety of unconsciously exchanged inner images those which are his/her own.

It is only when the subject has heard the other person echo something which he/she has said himself/herself, and has thus “reflected” back to him/her, as a mirror does, an image which belongs to him/her, that he/she can come to a genuine realization, which is the preliminary and necessary condition for any effort involving integration of a conscious representation into his/her own psyche via symbolization.

A group using photographic images for mediation calls into play on the one hand the “ groupness ” of the external aspect of the setting and, on the other hand, mediation through the use of an object, in an intermediary position. Both are necessary to facilitating the link, not only of the primary to the secondary processes, from a topical standpoint, favoring both formal and temporal regression, but also from an economic standpoint, facilitating exchanges of inner images among the members of internal and external groups, diachronic (family) groups being remobilised in the “ here and now ” of the group session. From a dynamic standpoint, the group and the mediating object contribute favorably to more efficient containment of the violent dynamics of subjects who are grappling with their primary narcissistic conflict, in terms of a life-or-death struggle. Groups using the mediation approach ensure better contention, because mediation sets up a playing area separating what is real from what is imaginary, allowing the subject to get distance on objects, given that the external object, the photograph itself, remobilizes affectively - appropriated internal objects.

For this reason, each member of the group becomes deeply involved with “ his/her ” photo in a way which goes far beyond the simple relationship one may have to just any cultural object.. The photograph represents a small part of our inner lives, portraying a moment, a memory, a person, a trace of something which is brought back to life, through the intermediary of re-activated perceptual images. The photo is never an exact reflection of our inner reality, but only an approximation, a contiguous form, an analogical contour. It enters our inner world through our sensorial “window”. Sight is the dominant sense, but that which is seen is associatively linked to that which can be heard, smelled and touched. A photo can conjure up the sound of music, the fragrance of perfume, a movement, a touch. All techniques which use mediation have their specific features ; each one opening a particular gateway into our private,

inner, sensorial world.

In this issue of the Revue, we present several of our experiences, not only in the field of mental health and medical care, but also in the area of adult education or work with young job-seekers. We hope that, by sharing our experience in this way, we will help other professionals become aware of the interest of our particular clinical approach, using a mediating object with a group to promote linking by thinking.

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Unfortunately it's not possible to publish photos for technical reasons