

Strategic Phototherapy: Individual and Couple Therapeutic Techniques

Floriana Abbate^{1} and Luigi Scaringello¹*

¹ *Institute for the Study of Psychotherapy, via San Martino della Battaglia, 31, 00185 Roma, Italy*

**Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Floriana Abbate floriana.abbate@studenti.istitutopsicoterapie.it*

Abstract

Strategic phototherapy uses photography as a transformative therapeutic tool, drawing on its evocative and reflective power to facilitate change in both individual and relational dynamics. This approach provides creative techniques to disrupt dysfunctional patterns, stimulate insights, and promote tangible, lasting changes through a corrective emotional experience, from a strategic perspective, that is, within a systemic-constructivist framework. Photography captures moments that become memories, but strategic phototherapy transforms them into something memorable. Techniques like paradoxical photography, where “blocked” situations are symbolically reinterpreted to inspire new perspectives, and narrative phototherapy, which reconstructs personal stories through a series of curated images, help patients to explore emotions, redefine their narratives, and encourage change. In couples therapy, photography symbolically represents conflicts, desires, and significant moments, creating a space for mutual understanding and the restructuring of relational narratives. An innovative example proposed in this work is the use of the photo booth, which provides an intimate and playful context for partners to visualize the progress and the potential of their relationship, thus encouraging deeper, more conscious communication. Through the incorporation of photographs in strategic prescriptions, this prospective work offers a methodological reflection on the clinical potential of strategic phototherapy as an effective operational tool to promote significant change in interpersonal dynamics and emotional processes and provides practical insights for future empirical validation.

Keywords: Strategic phototherapy, change, corrective emotional experience, paradoxical photography, photo booth, strategic prescriptions

Introduction

Photography was officially born in 1839 with the patent by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851), during the Second Industrial Revolution, which was rich in important inventions that changed not only our way of living but also our way of thinking (Daniel, 2004). Among the most significant innovations of the time were the automobile and electricity. Within this historical framework, photography progressively evolved, fully leveraging technological advancements to become one of the essential tools for social growth. Initially compared to painting, it gradually asserted its own artistic identity and, over time, became one of the most influential art forms. However, photography is much more than a mere technical tool for capturing images: it is a powerful and complex medium that intertwines art, memory, communication, and introspection—a visual language that surpasses cultural and linguistic boundaries. Each image conveys a visual message that can be interpreted differently depending on the observer's personal experience and context. Its accessibility, now amplified by smartphones and social media, has transformed the way we communicate. In the past, photographs were rare and symbolically rich objects, carefully preserved to pass on memories of important events. With technological progress and digitalization, the cost of photography

has decreased, and taking pictures has become increasingly routine and performative. However, this abundance has changed our relationship with images: from tangible and intimate objects, they have become often ephemeral digital memories, consumed quickly and by a vast, sometimes unknown, audience. Beyond its aesthetic value, photography holds strong evocative power. Roland Barthes (1980) introduced the concept of *punctum*, the most personal, intimate, and unpredictable element of a photograph—the part of the image that emotionally strikes the viewer—emphasizing how images operate on an emotional and symbolic level, becoming tools to explore one's inner world. According to authors such as Judy Weiser (2013) and Mastandrea (2011), the photographic image acts as a bridge between emotion, memory, and reflection, allowing access to deep contents that are difficult to express through verbal language alone. Photography, therefore, not only captures a moment but amplifies its meaning through the subjective filter of the observer. From a strategic perspective, it functions as a tool for change, making the invisible visible: emotions, roles, stories, and lived experiences can be narrated and transformed through the image. The very act of taking a photograph is already an intentional action that alters the perception of experience. In this sense, photography becomes a tool for

intervention—not merely for expression—enabling symbolic action on the Self and activating corrective experiences on a cognitive, emotional, and relational level.

Theoretical Framework: From Photography as Expression to Photography as a Therapeutic Strategy

In clinical settings, photography has historically been used to stimulate narration, evoke memories, or symbolically represent the patient's inner world. Numerous scientific studies show how photography is useful in processes of change and healing for patients suffering from eating disorders (Wessells, 2008), depressive and anxiety disorders (Seifert, 2014), obsessive-compulsive disorders (Mancini, 2006), and for empowerment (Levin et al., 2007). Methods such as *photovoice*, the use of family albums, or therapeutic self-portraits have been applied in various psychotherapeutic contexts. However, these tools remain predominantly exploratory and lack an operational structure aimed specifically at change. The strategic approach, derived from systemic-constructivist models, is based on the idea that the problem is not what happens, but how it is perceived and maintained through dysfunctional attempted solutions. From this perspective, photography is no longer used to "express" but to alter perception and generate new corrective

experiences, allowing the patient to see themselves and the world in a new way. Strategic Phototherapy emerges from this theoretical and operational integration, placing photography not as an object of analysis but as an active, experiential, and transformative intervention, structured within the therapeutic protocol.

Strategic Phototherapy: A New Clinical Methodology

The strategic approach, founded on the work of Paul Watzlawick and further developed by Giorgio Nardone (2015), is based on the idea that therapeutic change can occur through brief but profoundly impactful interventions. These are not focused on removing the cause of the problem, but on breaking the cycle of dysfunctional attempted solutions. The therapeutic techniques are tailored to the individual and aim to produce corrective emotional experiences capable of altering perceptions, emotions, and behaviors in a short period. Strategic phototherapy was developed with the intent to integrate the visual and symbolic dimension of photography into the strategic clinical intervention. In this context, photography is not merely a representation of the past but a simulation of a new possible reality, through which the patient can observe themselves from different perspectives, uncover rigidity, and activate new expressive

and experiential possibilities. Precisely because of its evocative and transformative power, certain prescriptive rules should be followed when using photography in strategic therapy. The first rule is that the photos used will not be seen by anyone outside the therapeutic context. This requirement removes the element of performance, as a photo taken without spontaneity often leads individuals to adopt poses or expressions they believe will make them more likable to others. Another important aspect is that all photos used in sessions—whether pre-existing or newly taken—must be printed. This is essential for the images to be tangible objects that can be touched, torn, or used to build collages in the construction of new narratives. Finally, it is preferable for the photos to remain with the patient. This is both for legal reasons (in case other people are visible in the photos and cannot sign a release form, or if the photos involve nudity or intimacy) and so that the patient can choose to keep them, destroy them, or finally disclose to someone (Scaringello, 2024).

Techniques of Strategic Phototherapy for Individual Therapy

Within individual therapy practice, specific techniques have been developed that integrate photography as an essential part of the therapeutic strategy. The operational core of

the approach consists of creating personalized photographic interventions, tailored to the type of problem and the phase of the therapeutic process. The photographic techniques follow the logic of strategic prescriptions, that is, concrete actions designed to disrupt perceptual patterns and promote cognitive restructuring. The main techniques include:

Strategic Photo-Portrait: In this technique, the patient is invited to create a sequence of symbolic self-portraits representing different aspects of the self: the ideal self, the self perceived by others, the rejected self, and the authentic self. The goal is to produce a visual comparison between these perceived identities to break the crystallization of the self-image and facilitate the integration of denied or repressed parts. These self-portraits are then used in sessions to guide strategic reflections, trigger inner dialogues, and stimulate processes of transformative self-narration.

Paradoxical Photo: The therapist gives the patient a paradoxical prescription, which involves creating a specific photographic image with defined emotional and symbolic characteristics. For example, a patient stuck in a pattern of control might be asked to photograph themselves in a state of total disorder, with the goal of breaking the rigid perceptual-reactive system that maintains the problem.

Paradoxical Albums: The patient builds a photographic album containing images that

contradict their dysfunctional thoughts (e.g., a person who feels inadequate composes an album of personal successes). The collection acts as visual evidence that challenges self-limiting beliefs.

Narrative Phototherapy: The person tells a story using a sequence of photographs. The therapist helps identify dysfunctional patterns and rewrite the narrative in a more adaptive way.

Symbolic Representations of Success: Through photography, it is possible to create the representation of the person after change, helping them internalize this future state. For example, someone might create a photo collage that illustrates their goals or an ideal future life.

Paradoxical prescriptions, such as those described, work by disconfirming dysfunctional beliefs, interrupting the confirmation loop between perception and behavior. Photography not only symbolically represents the blockage but becomes an active tool for creating an alternative emotional experience. Visual confrontation, in fact, facilitates distancing from dysfunctional self-narratives and stimulates the reconstruction of a more integrated self-image.

The Photo Booth: A Therapeutic Space for Couples

The photo booth, reimagined as a therapeutic space, represents a unique tool in couple

therapy. It is a protected, enclosed environment rich in symbolic value: a place of intimacy, playfulness, but also of automatic repetition—just like in dysfunctional relationships. Entering the booth means posing together, negotiating shared space, and deciding how to present oneself to others. It becomes a powerful metaphor for relational dynamics within the couple, and the resulting images serve as tangible representations of these dynamics. The booth allows the couple to act concretely and symbolically on their relationship, breaking routine and promoting new perspectives. It offers a space for spontaneous and creative interaction, free from the pressure of a traditional therapeutic setting. The images produced can then be used to explore and represent aspects of the relationship that may be difficult to access through verbal dialogue. Each photo becomes a visual metaphor for relational dynamics, unspoken emotions, or untold stories that partners live daily. Each image can be reinterpreted and discussed by the therapist and the couple as a new narrative of the relationship—one that may replace or revise the existing one. The booth thus becomes a starting point for reconsidering how the couple tells their story, challenging limiting beliefs or dysfunctional roles, and evolving into a powerful therapeutic tool. With its physical and symbolic structure, the photo booth provides a unique setting that can be particularly

useful in therapy. It is a confined and intimate space where the couple is invited to share moments of closeness, express themselves through poses and facial expressions, and interact in an unfamiliar way. This shared experience, captured in instantly viewable photos, becomes an opportunity to explore the relationship, highlighting both strengths and challenges. By entering the booth and choosing how to pose, the couple can explore and reinterpret their relational dynamics, gain new perspectives on their interaction, and stimulate change in communication and behavior. The booth offers an opportunity to decode and restructure the couple's narrative, fostering the creation of new stories, new roles, and, most importantly, new solutions. In a strategic therapeutic context—where the goal is practical and functional change—photography becomes a tangible strategy to transform the vision of the relationship, helping the couple see themselves and each other in a new, more positive and constructive light. A model of intervention will be proposed below.

The Booth Protocol

The intervention follows a series of clearly defined phases:

Phase 1: Free Shot

The couple enters the booth and takes a sequence of photo strips without any instructions, revealing the spontaneity (or rigidity) of their interaction.

Phase 2: Thematic photographic prescription

The couple is asked to embody different emotions or situations: “take a photo as lovers,” “one as if you're angry,” “one as parents”. This exercise is designed to explore the roles they take on in the relationship and to observe how flexible—or stereotyped—those representations are.

Phase 3: Strategic Review

The photos are analyzed together in session, highlighting relational patterns, repetitive scripts, and potential transformation points.

Phase 4: Photographic restructuring

The couple is given a symbolic photographic assignment to complete outside the therapy room. The goal is to break dysfunctional relational patterns or introduce new modes of emotional connection.

It is important to emphasize that this protocol should not be understood as a rigid and standardized model, but rather as a flexible guideline to be adapted to the specific characteristics, needs, and dynamics of the couple. Each phase can be modified, omitted, or explored thoroughly depending on the therapeutic context and the goals of the intervention, always keeping in mind the centrality of the subjective experience and the importance of supporting each partner's evolutionary process within the relationship.

Clinical Benefits

Using the photo booth helps stimulate non-verbal communication: the expressions, postures, and interactions captured in the photo strips offer a valuable opportunity to explore these aspects. Moreover, the photographs become a form of documentation of the therapeutic journey and can serve as a relational mirror during moments of crisis or stagnation. The booth is a neutral and protected space, distant from everyday dynamics. Here, the couple can experiment with new ways of relating without external pressures. The printed images also provide instant visual feedback. The couple can reflect on what emerges from the photos, discussing the emotions and meanings they evoke. Through these images, difficult topics can be approached indirectly but effectively, using photography as a catalyst for dialogue. The couple can take photos that symbolically represent the problems they are facing and then discuss them during the session to identify the steps needed to overcome the barriers. These images can also be used to capture the couple's spontaneous interactions, offering a starting point for reflection on roles, emotional distance, intimacy, or tension (who led the interaction? Who followed?). Another benefit of this tool is the rediscovery of playfulness and lightness. In many distressed relationships, play and complicity are sacrificed to conflict or daily stress. The photo booth, with its playful aspect, of-

fers an opportunity to rediscover the joy of doing something together. Even in couple therapy, photos can be used to symbolically represent the process of change. For instance, the couple can take two series of photo strips: one representing their current state, and another portraying what they hope to become together. Finally, the booth can be used to document significant moments of the therapeutic journey. Each photo can represent a milestone, helping the couple visualize the progress made.

Clinical Example: Marco and Luisa

A concrete example of the effectiveness of the photo booth as a therapeutic tool comes from the case of Marco (45 years old) and Luisa (42 years old), who have two young children and are married since ten years. The couple entered therapy during a period of emotional disengagement, marked by frequent arguments and Luisa's perception of being emotionally neglected. She complained about a lack of attention and closeness, while Marco described an exhausting work situation and financial difficulties that made him less emotionally available. After an initial phase of exploring their dynamics, the couple was assigned a cycle of tasks aimed at rekindling mutual care and symbolic courtship, including the photo booth experience. The task involved going together to a booth to

take a series of spontaneous photos, followed by themed shots (e.g. “a photo as lovers,” “a photo representing a happy moment from the past”). In the following session, the couple reported—somewhat to their surprise—that the experience had been unexpectedly intimate and fun. Together with the therapist, they analyzed the photos, exploring how they were seated, their physical closeness or distance, facial expressions, eye contact, and most importantly, the feelings experienced during the shoot. This led to the emergence of shared positive memories and a renewed emotional closeness that had been absent for some time. The photo booth experience was then prescribed again, with new symbolic prompts, this time aimed at visually representing the “couple they wish to become”. In subsequent sessions, the images were used to highlight observed changes, renewed emotional intentionality, and the possibility of constructing a new narrative of their relationship.

Limitations of the Approach

Despite its observed effectiveness in clinical practice, strategic phototherapy presents several methodological limitations. First and foremost, the lack of structured empirical studies limits the potential for scientific validation of the approach. Additionally, the effectiveness of the techniques relies heavily on

the subjectivity of the individual and the relational context with the therapist, making replicability challenging. Caution is also necessary when using images, as they may evoke traumatic content or be interpreted defensively if not adequately contextualized within the therapeutic process.

Discussion

As described in this brief overview, the use of photography in individual and couple therapy can prove to be a valuable tool for fostering introspection, communication, and emotional connection. The ability of images to evoke memories, emotions, and personal meanings allows individuals to explore aspects of their identity and relationships in a creative and non-verbal way. In individual therapy, photography allows one to explore one’s own identity, to reinterpret past experiences, and to construct new narratives that support self-understanding and self-acceptance. In couple settings, it can amplify mutual understanding, stimulate dialogue, and strengthen the emotional bond. The innovative approach of phototherapy, by combining art and psychology, shows how photography can overcome communication barriers, promoting processes of change and personal growth. It also encourages an experiential dimension that helps individuals and couples see themselves and others in a new light, facilitating the development of greater awareness and

change strategies. Despite the undoubtedly promising foundations, further investigation into the topic is considered necessary. A concrete proposal for future research could involve the design of a qualitative and quantitative study based on multiple clinical cases documenting the therapeutic process of couples and individuals treated with strategic phototherapy techniques. This study should specifically evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the intervention, changes in relational and emotional processes, the therapeutic alliance, and outcomes in terms of symptom reduction and increased subjective well-being.

It would be advisable to adopt pre- and post-treatment assessment tools to ensure systematic data collection and to support the empirical validation of the approach. This would not only strengthen the scientific foundation of the model but also allow for the development of more clearly defined operational guidelines, promoting the ethical, effective, and replicable use of strategic phototherapy in clinical practice.

Author Contribution: F.A. Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing—original draft, Writing—review and editing.; L.S. Conceptualization, Resources, Writing—original draft, supervision of the final draft.

Funding: The article did not receive funding for publication.

Data Availability Statement: There are no data to share.

Conflicts of Interest: There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Informed Consent Statement: Written informed consent has been obtained from the patient(s) to publish this paper.

Citation: Abbate, F., Scaringello, L. (2025). Strategic Phototherapy: Individual and Couple Therapeutic Techniques. *Synapsis Journal*, 1(2). 20-28. <https://doi.org/10.69127/synapsis.2025.01.07>

Reference

Barthes, R. (1980). *La Camera Oscura. Nota sulla fotografia*. Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi. ISBN: 978-8806510374

Daniel, M. (2004). *Daguerre (1787–1851) and the invention of photography*. Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/daguerre-1787-1851-and-the-invention-of-photography>

Levin, T., Scott, B.M., Borders, B., Hart, K., Lee, J., & Decanini, A. (2007). *Aphasia talks: Photography as a means of communication, self-expression, and empowerment in persons with aphasia*. *Topics in Stroke Rehabilitation*, 14(1), 72–84. <https://doi.org/10.1310/tsr1401-72>

Mancini, F. (2006). *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: The Contribution of Neuroscience to Cognitive Psychotherapy*. Einaudi.

Mastandrea, S. (2011). *Psychology of Art and Aesthetics: From Cognitive Neuroscience to Artistic Practice*. Carocci. ISBN-13: 978-8843077229.

Nardone, G. Watzlawick, P. (2015). *L'arte del cambiamento*. TEA libri. ISBN-13: 978-8850240852

Scaringello, L. (2024). *Strategic Phototherapy. Lessons* [lezione non pubblicata. Master in sessuologia clinica]. Istituto per lo Studio delle Psicoterapie.

Seifert, K. (2014). *The effect of photo-therapy in the treatment of depression in an inpatient setting: Research findings from a study conducted at the clinic for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the University Hospital in Bonn*.

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.atol.v5i1.354>

Weiser, J. (2013). *Fototerapia. Tecniche e strumenti per la clinica e gli interventi sul campo*. Franco Angeli. ISBN 9788820462116

Wessells, M. (2008). *Using Family Photographs in the Treatment of Eating Disorders*. *Psychotherapy in Private Practice*, 3 (4), 95–105. https://doi.org/10.1300/J294v03n04_15