Using Ambiguous Images to Clarify Life Situations

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Abstract

The use of ambiguous photographs as tools for enhancing self-awareness is well researched by Joel Walker in his studies using The Walker Visuals, which are a set of four ambiguous, dreamlike images that are currently employed in psychological assessment and psychotherapy. The primary purpose of this study was to further explore his ideas, as well as introduce and test out a new method for the use of ambiguous visual images to assist individuals in clarifying a particular life situation. The Ambiguous-Image Life Insight Clarification Interview (AILICI) is different compared to methods used by Walker with the same images in that specific attention is placed on a single life situation prior to the presentation of the ambiguous images. By interpreting the Walker Visuals after describing a life situation, subjects access associations related to their situation that otherwise did not surface through verbal description.

The Walker Visuals may be found online at the following address:

Background and Purpose of Project

Mental imagery techniques have played a crucial role in the history of many types of psychodynamic therapies (Suler, 1989). Similarly, the use of photographs and other visual images have been employed in "phototherapy" (Weiser, 1993). An underlying principle of all such techniques is that visual images can bypass conscious defenses in order to access an individual’s unconscious thoughts and feelings. Additionally, the use of images, particularly ambiguous images, often involves projective techniques. While “[p]rojective tests such as the Rorschach and TAT were designed for the purpose of assessment” (Walker, 1982, p. 450), the use of images in phototherapy is primarily for therapeutic purposes. One therapeutic purpose images are used for is to help an individual increase their self-awareness.

The use of ambiguous photographs as tools for enhancing self-awareness is well described in Dr. Joel Walker's paper, "The use of ambiguous artistic images for enhancing self-awareness in psychotherapy” (Walker, 1986). This study examined the use of ambiguous visual images, known as the Walker Visuals (Walker, n.d.), to assist individuals in clarifying a particular life situation. The Walker Visuals are a set of four ambiguous, dreamlike images created by Dr. Joel Walker and are currently used in psychological assessment and psychotherapy all-over the world.

The primary purpose of this study was to further explore Dr. Joel Walker’s ideas, as well as, introduce and test out a new method. By interpreting the Walker Visuals after describing a life situation, subjects might be able to access associations related to their situation that otherwise did not surface through verbal description. When a particular area of life or life situation is brought to awareness and immediately followed by describing an ambiguous image, an individual would be able to access previously unarticulated thoughts and feelings about that particular area of life or life situation that otherwise had not surfaced.
Methods

Subjects

Five participants were recruited randomly with an age range of 18 to 21 years. Four participants were female and one participant was male. All of the participants were enrolled at Rider University and four are members of the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program. “McNair participants are either first-generation college students with financial need, or members of a group that is traditionally underrepresented in graduate education and have demonstrated strong academic potential.” (University of Central Florida, n.d.).

The prospective participant was given an informed consent statement form (see appendix 1), had the content of the form explained to them, and given a copy of the informed consent statement form.

Ambiguous-Image Life Insight Clarification Interview (AILICI)

After the participant understood and gave their consent, the participant was instructed to “Describe in as much detail as comfortable something in particular about yourself and your life.” These descriptions were given orally and recorded with an audio device. When the participant finished their description, they were presented with the four Walker Visuals. The four 8.5” X 11” images appear hazy and unclear, as if the camera was unable to focus on a moving object. They range in color across the color spectrum, including shades of gray, and each image additionally appears to contain a human figure. The participant was then instructed to “Choose one image and describe in as much detail as possible what you see.” When the participant finished their description, they were instructed to “Please describe again what you said earlier about yourself and your life. This time, does anything else come to mind about it?” This was followed by a structured interview that was given orally and recorded with an audio device and involved all of the following questions in order.
1. Did looking at the picture in any way change how you think about your life situation or life event?
2. If you think about how you described your life situation or life event, and how you described the picture, do you see any similarities... any differences?
3. What might be the significance of those similarities and differences?

The Ambiguous-Image Life Insight Clarification Interview (AILICI) method is different compared to methods used by Dr. Joel Walker with the same images. The primary difference is the specific attention on a single life situation prior to the presentation of the ambiguous images. Additionally, in the introduced method the instructions given to the individual infer no connection between the life situation and the description of the ambiguous image until after the individual is finished describing the image. In the methods used by Dr. Walker, the individuals are often asked to talk about something regarding one of these images rather than simply describing the ambiguous image. Finally, the AILICI is a new method of incorporating ambiguous images in a structured procedure.

Results

Participant 1: Ms. A.

Ms. A is a 21-year old, female college student. Ms. A’s description of an area of life or life situation included revealing that her parents are originally from a foreign country. Her parent’s native language is often spoken at home and was also her first language, because her parents didn’t want to teach her incorrect English. The majority of Ms. A’s description however, was of her experience of beginning preschool, her related anxiety, and the recurrence of anxiety throughout her pre-collage education. Ms. A selected Photo 2.
Ms. A provided two descriptions for her ambiguous image. The first description was of a person looking “like he’s swimming in Jamaica or somewhere really cool.” The second description also involved swimming, this time of “a girl and she’s swimming in the ocean at an island.” After describing the ambiguous image they had selected, Ms. A, whose life situation was their experience going to preschool and the anxiety that ensued, shared the response she often receives when she tells this story. Ms. A shared that whenever she tells anyone her life situation, people will often react with concern, and question “aww are you OK?” Ms. A explained she would respond, “Yea, I’m like fine. Like it doesn’t really impact me really, it’s just like something that happened to me, so, and this girl’s (referring to the girl Ms. A described in the image) having fun and I have fun. So it’s like, it’s like we’re good.” This is the second connection Ms. A had made between this event and her current life. While this new articulation may reveal the Ms. A’s perspective of the situation, it is important to recognize it is contradictory to her earlier claim of this life situation being where her anxiety may have originated. It should be also noted that when Ms. A was asked if she thought looking at the picture in any way changed how she thinks about her life situation, this contradiction again surfaced. Ms. A answered no, it had not changed how she thinks about her life situation “because it’s something I’ve dealt with forever. So, it’s just something that’s just been there forever. There’s nothing I can change about it.” Inferring that, this life situation does in fact impact her in some manner, opposed to telling others “it doesn’t really impact me really.”

Participant 2: Ms. B.

Ms. B is a 21-year old female college student. Ms. B’s description of an area of life or life situation included a description of herself as being religious and family oriented. Ms. B then recounted her decision to move to the United States of America from a Caribbean nation in Latin America. Ms. B explained that she is still affected and haunted by their decision. Ms. B selected Photo 1.
Ms. B chose to share that she is very family oriented and very religious, as well as about her decision to move from a Caribbean nation in Latin America to the United States of America, and how she is still affected by her decision. Ms. B clarified that the decision still haunts her. She explains this is because they “have to get used to not being close to my family, my friends, uhm, adapting to a new environment, and trying to better myself, career-wise and stuff like that.” Ms. B, like Ms. A, offered two descriptions for her ambiguous image. Both descriptions included the concept of jumping; the first, “a guy, on the edge of a roof” was described to be “contemplating jumping out.” The second description “still involves jumping,” but this time from a “pool board.” Furthermore, Ms. B claimed what they see “all involves jumping from a cliff or something like that.” When Ms. B readdressed her life situation, after viewing and describing an ambiguous image, she reiterated her perspective on her life situation and included the recurring action of jumping used in her description of her ambiguous image. Ms. B said,

“No personally, but it was a tough, like I said, a tough situation of what happened to me, or what I’ve been going through. Maybe someone would even consider or think, like, with all the stress and all the confusion, to do the same thing. Maybe jump out or being depressed.”

“I’ve been depressed for the same reasons but it has never crossed my mind to do that.”

It is seen here that Ms. B utilized her concept of an individual jumping off of something, brought to awareness while she described an ambiguous image, as a catalyst to introduce new emotions (i.e. stress, confusion, and depression) regarding her life situation. Interestingly, these new emotions were first offered as “someone” else’s, rather than as her own, before the emotion’s connection to Ms. B was suggested. This relation between Ms. B and “someone” is continued throughout the rest of her description:

“If I was, you know, someone else or, you know, I would let my life situation, uhm, like embark everything. I would, that would be one of the possibilities. Not for me, but like, I’m saying for someone that might go through the same thing.”
Participant 3: Mr. C.

Mr. C is a 19-year old male college student. Mr. C’s description of an area of life or life situation included describing their life at home, coming from a “bad neighborhood” and not having much money. Mr. C then transitioned to speaking about his life at school, mentioning that he likes school and being in school because it’s an escape. In his narrative on being a college student, a majority of his description focused on moving through the years and preparing for graduate education. Mr. C selected Photo 1.

Mr. C’s description of his ambiguous image was primarily of a female “looking off a roof” with her hands outstretched, and “looking at something random, so maybe she’s looking towards something she would jump towards.” Mr. C’s life situation centered on his experience as a college student, including that it is hard being a college student. Mr. C also spoke about being a junior “getting ready for senior year, which is getting ready for graduate school,” mentioning he was “kind of nervous.” When describing his life situation again, Mr. C admitted, “Being a college student, I guess, partly affected the picture.” Mr. C explained that “being a junior, it feels like I’m looking towards something all the time,” which simply reiterates the aspect of getting ready for senior year and graduate school. However, Mr. C expands on this and provides possible insight or possible starting points leading to insight into his feelings of nervousness.

“So, if I relate it back to the picture, it looks like, like, I’m on the cusp of something really different and I don’t really know what’s going to come ahead of me. The girl looks like she’s about to jump into something. The sky looks kind of bleak and dark and not necessarily, not to say that I think that my future is dark, but it’s really unclear I feel sometimes. That’s kind of the reason I’m in McNair, to kind of clarify things because I would probably be lost without it.”

It is seen here that Mr. C, after describing an ambiguous image, was able to articulate some of the possible contributions to his feelings of nervousness. Additionally, Mr. C
was also able to offer an area of life that he is using to help change these factors. Finally, Mr. C mentioned “that weird image kind of made me feel something.” In a therapeutic setting, inquiring about what Mr. C felt, and the ensuing discussing, might prove to be advantageous.

**Participant 4: Ms. D.**

Ms. D is a 21-year old female college student. Ms. D’s description of an area of life or life situation included being close with her parents and the members of her extended family. Ms. D also spoke about being an only child, but possibly considering her cousin a sibling because they grew-up together. Finally, Ms. D shared that her cousin is soon turning twenty-one. Ms. D selected *Photo 1.*

Ms. D started describing her life situation by saying, “I’m an only child, so, no siblings. I guess the only sibling I would consider, only person I would consider a sibling, is my cousin (name omitted), because I grew up with her.” She continued to share that her cousin has a birthday coming up and that Ms. D and her cousin are “really, really close.” Ms. D also shared the closeness she has with her parents and the rest of her family. Ms. D was then asked to describe one of the four ambiguous images. The ambiguous image was explained as looking “like it’s out of focus” and included an individual on a ledge “looking like they’re contemplating jumping off, and not really. Look as if, like they’re trying to balance?” This same individual was said to be feeling “out of place, out of balance maybe.” Next, Ms. D was asked to describe her life situation again and if anything else came to mind. Similar to the first time, Ms. D began by mentioning being an only child, followed by her cousin being “like a sister to me” and being close to her parents. Then, Ms. D began to articulate her feelings, sharing, “I guess the only thing is that I feel, sometimes I feel like I’m out of my generation.” Ms. D explains “I was usually, like, around adults twenty-four seven. So, I feel, like, I’m not more mature than people my age, but I’m just more in tune to the adult population more than my younger population.” Ms. D’s description of an individual in the image “trying to balance,” feeling out of place, and out of balance flawlessly parallels with her newly articulated feelings. This
connection between Ms. D’s description of the ambiguous image and development of her life situation are easily noticeable, but are also confirmed by Ms. D. When Ms. D was asked if she thought looking at the picture in any way changed how you think about that thing concerning yourself, she stated:

“Uhm, not really, but I guess what I was thinking about before when I said this person on a ledge, feeling out of balance, I guess I could relate that to me feeling out of balance with, like, it being my generation. I don’t feel a part of my generation, I feel a part of the older generation.”

Although Ms. D commented that looking, and ultimately describing, the ambiguous image might not have changed the way in which she thinks about her life situation, Ms. D demonstrated accessing and communicating previously unarticulated thoughts and/or feelings through the process.

**Participant 5: Ms. E.**

Ms. E is an 18-year old female college student. Ms. E’s description of an area of life or life situation included her change from being quiet and shy to being an outgoing person with confidence. She credited her change to the experiences she has had in her life and shared that she believes this will make her transition to college easier. Ms. E selected *Photo 1.*

Ms. E conveyed that she personally thinks she is an outgoing person, but justified that she’s “only outgoing because of the experiences I have had.” Ms. E admitted being “really quite and shy” in the past, “and then through different activities in my life, and whatever, I’ve gained more confidence in myself to be more of an outgoing person.” Finally, she related this change to making “the transition to, like, the college experience for me a lot easier.” Ms. E’s description of her ambiguous image included “someone, like a shadow of someone, is falling off of something” and “where it’s falling to is just, like, sort of unclear.” This description of an individual, or their shadow, may be representative of Ms. E’s transition to college. This possible representation was supported when Ms. E readdressed her life situation and said, “Uhm, well, the only thing that came in my mind, I don’t know if it completely
relates, but whatever came to my mind was just the sort of, uhm, to me, like, the whole, like, coming into college thing. I guess because it has been on my mind lately.” Ms. E also introduced her “uncertainty of knowing, I guess about college” and “not knowing if I would be able to find the right place to go to college or if I was, like, gonna.” This might also be represented in Ms. D’s description of the ambiguous image, by way of the unclear area to where the figure is falling and her description of the image being “very shaky and unclear.” Finally, Ms. E asserted that another concern was if she would “make the right decision or have, like, enough, like, have, like, the support of my parents to be able to go somewhere.” This may have also been represented in Ms. E’s description of an ambiguous image. Ms. E said, “it just reminds me of distance or something that is distant from someone, or something. Uhm, and it’s sort of, like, looks like their arms are out. To me it looks like a person, it looks like their arms are out.” While the validity of these representations is subjective, Ms. E admitted “I guess it, looking at it [the ambiguous image] and looking deeper into it, sort of triggered things to go through my mind, where as if, I guess, I didn’t look at it, I wouldn’t be thinking about those thoughts.”

Discussion

Cognition-Sensation Projection and Action Projection

In this study, there were two divergent patterns found in the language and manner used to describe an ambiguous image. While individual descriptions may not fall exclusively into one of the two patterns, the characteristics of the two patterns appear to be categorical. These patterns may be identified as either cognition-sensation projection or action projection. Here, the term “projection” is not being used in the classic psychoanalytic manner where “projection” is a type of defense mechanism. Instead “projection” should be understood as the act of an individual attributing specific characteristics and/or structure to an ambiguous image.
Cognition-sensation projection is the act of applying qualities related to thinking, sensation, or pre-action, to visual stimuli. An individual’s description of an ambiguous image may be classified as cognitive-sensitive when the description of the ambiguous image contains a recurring theme related to thinking, feeling, or pre-action (i.e. “thinking it’s a roof”, “she’s feeling the wind”, “they’re contemplating jumping off”, “they’re thinking or maybe they’re, it’s kind of like that feeling like you feel not like you’re dropping”, “they’re just contemplating things”).

Action projection is the act of applying qualities related to the performance of a physical action. An individual’s description of an ambiguous image may be classified as active when the description of the ambiguous image contains a recurring theme related to the performance of a physical action (i.e. swimming, jumping, falling). This understanding of cognition-sensation projection and action projection was discovered through observed patterns seen in the descriptions of an ambiguous image provided by participants involved in this study.

A relationship was also found between the style of projection (cognition-sensation projection or action projection) and the time period and theme of the participant’s life situation, as well as with the temporal perspective of the participant. The participants whose descriptions of their ambiguous image were more similar to cognition-sensation projection tended to demonstrate a current and future perspective. They spoke about current and future life events in addition to looking forward. Conversely, the participants whose descriptions of their ambiguous image were more analogous to action projection demonstrated a current and past perspective. These participants would speak about current life situations and past events that affect them in the present.

**Ability to Access Previously Unarticulated Thoughts and/or Feelings**

When the participants of this study were asked to describe their life situation again, after they viewed and described an ambiguous image, all five participants were able to access previously unarticulated thoughts and/or feelings regarding
their particular area of life or life situation. The participants attained these new articulations by rationalizing their description of an ambiguous image, by making connections between their life situation and their description of the ambiguous image or the ambiguous image itself, or a combination of the three. If utilized by a professional in a therapeutic setting, the awareness of these newly articulated thoughts and/or feelings might be psychologically beneficial.

The methods for using ambiguous images Dr. Joel Walker described in “The use of ambiguous artistic images for enhancing self-awareness in psychotherapy” (Walker, 1986) are quite valuable. However, while Dr. Walker used his photographs in a “systematic way to assist participants increase their self-awareness” (p. 241), the participants were initially unfocused on any one aspect of their life before viewing an ambiguous image. Consider Dr. Walker’s first case, Mr. A.

“In the first session following his excellent exam results he commented that the exams had overshadowed everything in therapy and that it was important for us to really get a clearer perspective on the underlying issues and conflicts in his life. I asked him to talk about his thoughts, feelings and fantasies regarding one of my images” (Walker, 1986, p. 243).

Both methods, Dr. Walker’s and the Ambiguous-Image Life Insight Clarification Interview, one introduced by this study, ask an individual to describe an ambiguous image in some manner. The fundamental difference between the two methods is the individual’s focus prior to their description of an ambiguous image. The benefits of the method introduced by this study may be supported by its comparison to the gains in retrieval of implicit memory as a result of priming. (i.e. The retrieval of implicit memory, the “availability of information through memory processes without the exertion of any conscious effort to encode or recover information” (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002), is often enhanced by priming, “the advantage conferred by prior exposure to a word or situation” (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002).)
Additionally, being aware of what is in an individual’s awareness prior to the reactions of an individual to an ambiguous image would be advantageous. Irvin D. Yalom, M.D. shared that in therapy “[s]ometimes it is best to offer commentary at the moment; other times it is best simply to store the incident and return to it later” (Yalom, 2002, p. 70). When this is taken into account, any symbolism or connection between an individual’s description of an ambiguous image and life situation may be brought up by a professional during psychotherapy and lead to further discussion. This ability for a projective method is unique in the sense that the professional and individual would not only be able to recall the distinct comment, but also be aware of the priming thoughts (i.e. the individual’s life situation). An understanding between one life situation and the individual’s thoughts and feelings related to that life situation might serve as a scheme for the understanding of other life situations that the individual responds to in a similar manner.

Although these findings seem promising, the introduced method has yet to be observed within psychotherapy. However, the data and ideas discovered in this research may lead to follow up research that addresses the function of the introduced method within the therapeutic environment, both individual and group. Because of the non-therapeutic nature in which this method was studied, the presented findings should be seen as preliminary until reproduced within psychotherapy.
Appendix 1

Informed Consent
Using Ambiguous Images to Clarify Life Situations
McNair Achievement Project, Summer 2012
Adam Natoli
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Thank you for your interest in participating in my research project. The purpose of the project is to understand how interpreting ambiguous pictures may assist an individual to clarify life situations. I am doing the project as an Independent Study as part of the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program at Rider University, under the supervision of Dr. John Suler.

The research will be an interview format. If you decide to participate, I will ask you describe something in particular about yourself or your life. I will then show you four ambiguous pictures and ask you to describe what you see. Afterwards, I will ask you a few questions about how you described that thing about yourself and how you reacted to the pictures.

If at any time you decide that you would rather not participate in this study, please feel free to let me know and you can withdraw from the study at any time.

In the paper that I will write for this research, I may use quotations of things you said during the interview. Any information that could identify you will not appear in the paper or in any notes I might take during the study. At the end of my project, I will delete the interview recordings.

If you have any questions at any time, feel free to ask me or Dr. Suler: suler@rider.edu – 609-895-5430

Thanks again for your help with my project.

(your signature) (date)
References


