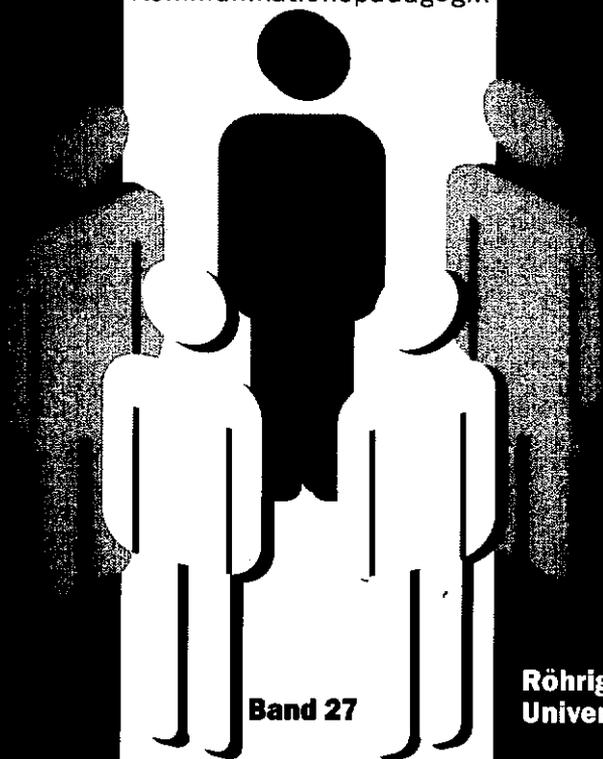Elizabeth C. Fine /
Bernd Schwandt (Eds.)

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Group Photography as a Means of Communicating with Groups

What do photographs have to do with "applied communication"? This paper describes how I work with group photographs within communication seminars and my classes, using the photo session as a means of getting people in contact, creating an artifact, taking a position, and by doing so, communicating in an uncommon, but effective way. Although group photographs exist in a large number[1], and taking photographs is a process that can create quite a response in groups, literature on this field is hard to find.

Otto (2006) took photographs of groups that dress alike- in a uniform style. As a student of communication design, she had to take photographs of "Heimat" (German "Homeland") and realized, that for her, people, not places mean "Heimat". In her work, she contrasts photos of servers in church with Gothics, of corps students with gay Cologne carnivalists, punks and Schuetzenverein[2]. Her focus is on groups that dress uniform – in a double sense. "They use their similar appearance to give a common statement to the outer world, and as a platform for common rituals among them."(2006:8). She comments that some of the groups felt honored that a "stranger" showed that much interest in them. Also, they were surprised to see photographs of other groups, with reactions ranging from "That exists?" to "They are nuts".

In "Reconstitutions", the French photographer Edouard Levé uses photographs taken from newspapers and magazines and rearranges them with actors. In the section "quotidian", the context of the initial

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1 Google 99.500 hits (Sept 10 2007), in "Wikimedia commons," the keyword "group" lists 5957 photos, mainly politicians, military, sports teams, musical groups (Sept 10 2007).

2 „Rifle association" does not really fit the traditional touch with costumes, village fair and social meeting point of these groups.

photo is removed; the viewer does not see article, photo title, and date of publication, and the floor and background are black:

> Even the casting is neutralized: the models do not resemble those on the initial images. They have no sex, no age, no race, no social status. They are between twenty-five and thirty-five years, wear jeans, shirt and sport shoes, clothing common for young Westerners. They are anonymous contemporaries, interchangeable (Levé 2003:87; translation B.S.).

In "Actualités" ("news"), he also takes images from newspapers, but "reduces" them by collecting hundreds of them, sorting them by genres and, several weeks later, making drawings from memory "that resemble each type of événement" (2003:85). The photograph is an accurate copy of the drawing, in which each detail is chosen. As the scene is decontextualized, and there are no signs of identification of the initial persons and circumstances, "their postures and gestures become essential semiological elements" (Levé 2003:85).

Looking at the photos, I feel a mixture of being impressed by the technical perfection of the photos, a feeling of "I know this kind of picture" and an ongoing irritation that "something is wrong about it". In contrast to the pictures of "real" groups, there is hardly any facial expression. The persons stand next to each other, often touching, yet there seems to be no real contact between them. Levés work contrasts to group sculptures common in psychodrama (cf. von Ameln et al 2004: 31 pp.) in which the sculpture is arranged by a member of the group. Here it is a arranged by the photograph, relying on a set of photographs published in newspapers and magazines, thereby unveiling a certain pattern of depicting groups in print media. Norms of social interaction like pausing, turn taking, asking questions are typically not aware to the persons speaking with one another (Welzer 2005) unless they are reflected in a special context. In a similar way, Levé makes the subconscious norms of "presenting groups in public" visible.

In my own work, I often take pictures of all kinds of groups of which I am a member or with whom I work. Sometimes these are just pictures that serve as a documentation or to remember names, sometimes the process of making them and the results move beyond that.

Working on this paper, I realized I have hundreds of them: so – what am I doing here?

Getting people into contact and creating an unusual perspective

Group photographs are an occasion to reduce the "normal" body distance. People get close to one another, and in order that all fit well in the photo, the photographer is allowed to direct them to pose even a bit closer to each other. In order to make the photo not boring, I ask the participants to make faces, to enlarge their ears with their hands or to hold their hands before their mouth (like the "three wise monkeys" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_wise_monkeys). With groups that easily go with this, a next step can be a group sculpture (see below). After taking the photos, participants are relaxed (sometimes relieved) and I take two more photos – often the best ones.

Being influenced by psychodrama, I often work with **changing perspective.**

An usual perspective is to step on a chair or table or from a staircase: or even from three floors above. Optically, this is advantageous as there is more space for heads and faces and less for feet in the photo.

The opposite perspective is the view from the ground; I lie down on the floor, the group stands in a circle and looks down. Students espe-

cially enjoy the perspective of a professor lying below them. In another case of the worm's eye view, the group climbed on a thick fallen tree; in order to get up there and to stay there, they had to help each other; this created movement and physical closeness.

Other perspectives used are: on a staircase (quite common); unusual scenes or backgrounds, such as posing in an oversized picture frame, or with a beach chair in front of the seminar hotel; a living pyramid; or each person resting his/her head on a neighbor's shoulder.

Technical conditions

When I began this project, I worked with a Canon reflex camera for the reason of high picture quality that is useful for bigger prints like 20/30 or 30/45 centimetres. Now I work with my third digital camera that produces picture quality which is as high (or even better) than that of good quality film. As in other areas of communication, this **technology** changes not only the way of taking photos, but also the possibilities to use, reproduce, circulate, and manipulate them.

The first, simple advantage: participants who I see again in two months or never again get an e-mail from me with two or three photographs as jpg-files attached. Other possibilities: combined with laptop and LCD-Projector ("beamer"), an almost immediate viewing (and

with that: a specific form of feedback) becomes easily possible. Compared with analogue cameras, the time between taking photographs and viewing slides decreased from at least two days to ten minutes. This reduction in time creates options.

In a conference with about 40 of my colleagues, I took photos of most of the participants during the day. It was November and already dark outside, so we started the LCD-Projector before dinner, but instead of the "common use" of one more series of Powerpoint slides, I showed the pictures taken during the day. The audience (rather tired and enervated) reacted surprisingly high-spirited. The pictures were in contrast to the serious, conflict laden talks during the day and framed the event as colloquial, as meeting colleagues outside of work. Slide shows usually document not a business conference or university board meeting, but rather vacations, family celebrations or office outings. One might interpret my experiment as an attempt to influence collective memory (Welzer 2005), or as a form of re-framing.

In another situation, I took photos at the end of a class on conflict behavior at a university. It was the session before Christmas and the students had decided to heat up mulled wine (Gluehwein). I took a couple of photos during an initial warm-up game. While the students were heating up the mulled wine, I transferred the photos to the laptop and showed them ten minutes later. Four years ago this was still a surprising thing to do. Technical opportunities influenced the group process: after seeing the first series of photographs, the students were interested to continue and we produced two more series of photographs. Viewing the first results triggered their interest to experiment themselves.

What happens with the photos?
The quickest option: as already mentioned, students or seminar participants get the photos by jpg-file. This can be by email, by putting the files on the university server, by collecting them and creating a CD (e.g. for the students who graduate). In other cases, I use computer printouts (fast and cheap) or classical photo prints (best quality and moderate cost). I suppose that the photos will help as a reminder not

only of the participants, but also of other parts of a seminar or work-shop – since visual memory has a higher capacity than other parts of memory, photographs are a suitable trigger (cf. Metzig & Schuster 1998:69, Markowitsch & Welzer 2005: 146). Following the assumptions of neuronal webs and multicoding (Storch & Krause 2003: 33, Hüther 2004), photographs are seen as a powerful way to activate other memories from the group process like place, weather, scenes, conversations, and even new knowledge from the seminar.

The photographs also have functions for myself: my remembrance of difficult groups or badly run seminars lasts for years; the memory for good seminars is much shorter. My group photo album helps to correct this memory: traces of seminars that were above average help me to recall "moments of excellence" and thereby function as a means of self-motivation (Martens & Kuhl 2005).

At the start of a semester, I meet fifty to hundred new students (usually once a week) and try to remember their names. Twelve in a group are easy to remember, but fifty and more are beyond my possibilities. So again, I take photographs of the group, and take a printout to the next session, asking the students to write their names next to their faces on the photo. Two minutes before each session are enough to call to my mind the names of my students; this is especially helpful concerning those persons that I already have "forgotten" and to whom I should pay more attention. Students seem to see this explicit effort to remember each one's name as a form of esteem.

Team development/organizational development

Each photo needs an arrangement of persons. Who a person stands next to, whether in front or well hidden in the back has its logic, often a subconscious logic (cf. Maschke 2005). Participants easily show more of their relations in and perceptions of the group than they know. In my consulting work outside the university I offer two kinds of seminars focusing on teams: the first are one day seminars that focus on relationships and communication within an administrative unit (which is not necessarily a team). The fact that participants usually choose to stand together "like a team" (often in contrast to their eve-

ryday experience of the group) may result in a subtle distortion of the system: one is getting physically close to the others which causes interactions that would not occur in the usual (physical and social) distance.


One can test constellations (closeness and distance, postures, habits) that usually do not occur. One can step back and claim "this was just taking a photo". "Taking a photo" refers to a tradition one has learned to accept, even when one is not in the mood to do so. People do not want to be spoilsports, so I "convince" them to take part. Getting physically close to the others creates new perspectives, and thereby, new perceptions of the group.
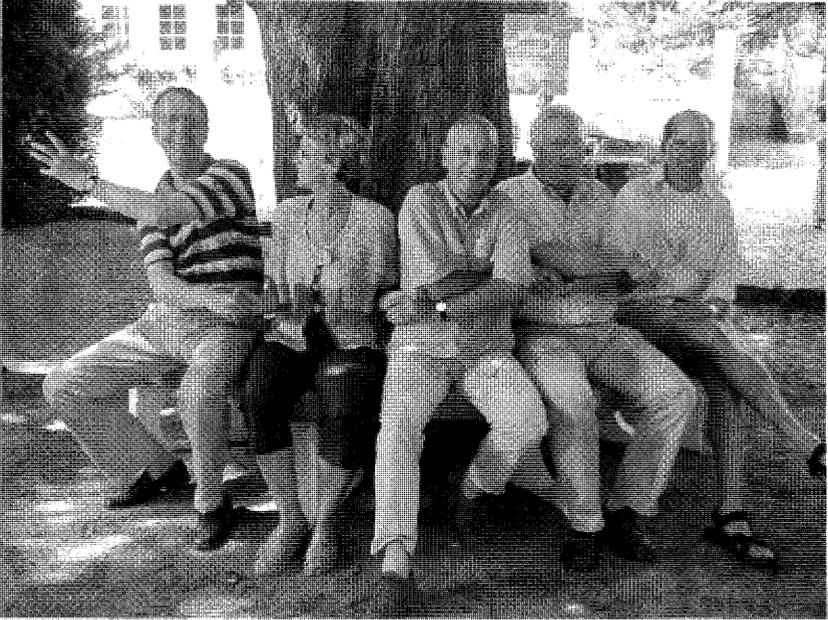
The second type of seminars last two days within a continuing education program called "Social Competence". Here the focus of the workshop is on team processes and participants have an explicit interest in what is happening in their own group. There exists another form of "contract", participants accept or even expect to talk about the processes initiated in the group. One exercise is to arrange the group as a sculpture: one person arranges the group according to his/her perception of persons and relationships.

I take photographs of the sculptures (more as a documentation) and then follows a group photograph session. The group sculpture usually has a warm-up function for the photo session. Participants are more acquainted with one another, more curious, more experimenting than in other situations; thus, photos become less conventional, more vivid.
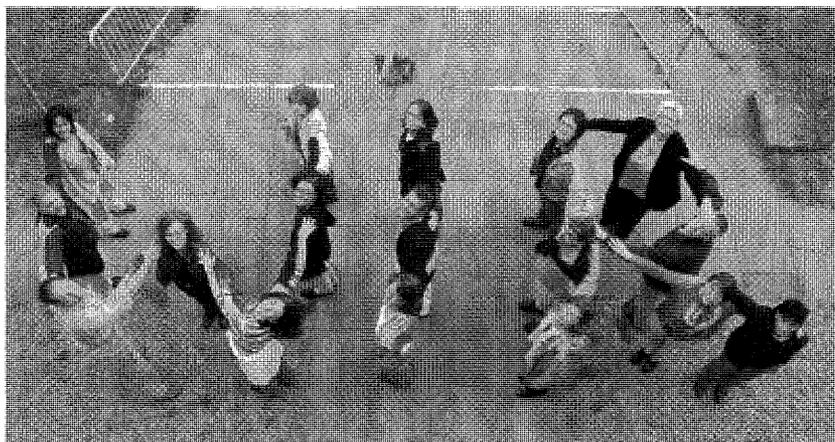
Self reflection and collective memory

In my own work, most photos center around making a technically and aesthetically acceptable picture of a group. In some instances, however, the process moves beyond that and the participants reflect on their relationship to each other; they "play around" and thereby test other forms of group constellations ("surplus reality" Moreno/ Krüger 1997) and/or create a picture that attracts attention. Last summer, I urged my colleagues in the business department to take a new group picture. Since it took awhile until all of them showed up, I started with a "warm up" session in which always five of them are sitting under a big tree, "hand in hand". Hanging the photos in the hallway of our department created high interest of among the students. Seeing their professors in casual clothing and having fun (including one professor who is only known wearing suits photographed in shorts); seeing them holding hands and playing around – this was a depiction of role aspects of my colleagues common to me, but surprisingly new to many students. The photographs seemed to question their view of their professors. The photo depicts the group at a certain point in time and thereby influences the memory and the construction of others about the group: the photographs of my colleagues holding hands emphasizes a certain event. Posed on a wall at the stairway where students pass every day, these artifacts influence the autobiographic and collective memory of students (Welzer 2005, Markowitsch & Welzer 2005).

The role of the photographer

Taking photos of people includes getting in contact with them. In this role exist other limitations and allowances than in the role of a professor or trainer. In a one day workshop within a ministry of justice the trainer would not be allowed to suggest: Please stand really close around your superior – how do you feel doing this? Think of German public servants in a ministry, most of them being lawyers/jurists – They just would not do this. A photographer, however, is allowed to break such social rules in order to take a good picture. The photographer possesses the qualities of a trickster, a joker, a court jester. In the role of a photographer, I am allowed to do things a professor is not.

Further, taking photographs is a process that is tied to experimenting for myself. Working with groups, often situations occur in which things are "not allowed" and in which I do feel inhibited. Changing my role is a chance to regain my own spontaneity and lack of inhibition, which usually influences the group to do the same. This way, my change of role is a way to overcome role restrictions. I give myself a license to play in settings where I "feel" playing is not allowed – but would be so helpful. The "license" includes influencing people's gestures and postures, in some cases even touching them and moving them around. I give license to the group members to touch and move others to another spot and thereby to express (pre-conscious or subconscious) perceptions about the group without the necessity to verbalize them. (see Martens/Kuhl 2005 or Storch/Krause 2003 for new conceptions of the unconsciousness). This way, taking group photographs becomes an intense form of interacting and communicating with and within groups.

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