

# [The meaning of family photographs](https://assignbuster.com/the-meaning-of-family-photographs/)

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The Meaning ofFamilyPhotographs By Charles Williams |[pic] | | Vanek family members dance. | The family is on vacation. A father takes out his point-and-shootcamera, poses his wife and kids and takes a quick snapshot. Eventually, the photograph is filed away in the familyphotoalbum. Ameaningless activity? Maybe not. Everyday, thousands of familyphotographs are taken with little regard for the meaning of therecorded image. Much attention has been paid to scholars' views ofdomestic life.

However, relatively little attention has been paid tocultural productions, such as photo albums, that have been generatedby families themselves (Trend, 1992). By neglecting discussion onthis subject, scholars indicate that the home is not a place ofseriousacademicwork (Trend, 1992). But researchers increasingly arestudying the meaning behind the photographs. April Saul won firstplace in the Feature Picture Story category at the 1992 Pictures ofthe Year competition for her portrayal of the American family. Shebelieved that family struggles were an important topic of journalism. I hope what it [winning] means is that the everyday struggles of anAmerican family are as valid in their own way as the struggles goingon in Azerbajian or Sarajevo -- and that the private wars next doorcan be as compelling as the bloody, public ones thousands of milesaway. " Family photographs can be considered cultural artifacts becausethey document the events that shape families' lives. Thus, therecording of family history becomes an important endeavor. In manycases, photographs are the only biographical material people leavebehind after they die (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980).

But, the impact offamily photo albums extends beyond merely recording history. Interpretation of family structures, relationships and self ispossible through viewing family photographs. The Meaning of family photographs Interpretation of meaning behind photographs assumes that they are ameans ofcommunication(Entin, 1979). Family photographs can tell astory. One photograph can be a mini-slice of an occurrence, but theaccumulation of pictures begins to reveal threads of consistent themesand patterns. For all practical purposes, they become an informalphoto essay.

Much like family storytelling, photographs indicaterelationships within and among the family. Indeed, the family photoalbum is an easy way to initiate outsiders to family history (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Photographs provide an easy topic of conversationallowing potential family members, such as boyfriends or girlfriends, to be initiated into family structures and tradition. A key principleto consider when interpreting photographs is that they are produced bychoice. Choices about who, what, when and where to photograph can sayas much about the photographer as the subject.

The camera does notsimply record an event but also records what the photographer choosesto see. Photographs are a statement about one's perception of theworld. They are a reflection and definition of self. If that personhas a happy family, then others may perceive him to be a good husbandor wife. Parents' innocent snapshots are important in constructingtheir sense of identity (Merz, 1988). Traditionally, photographs havebeen taken from a male perspective. The father is most often absentfrom family photographs because he is the one who usually commandsauthority, poses the family and takes the picture (Trend, 1992).

The family photographer isn't the only one who has authority to shape thefamily image. Other people may edit the photos. Some photographs areselected for presentation in an album while others are rejected. Control of the editorial process can be as important as control overproduction of the photographs. Decisions regarding what to keep, throw away and display can provide valuable information about theperson assembling the album. History of Family Portraiture Portraits of family members originally were produced by earlypainters.

Prior to the Twentieth century, family portraits were astatement of power and profession. Paintings were expensive and timeconsuming to produce, thereby limiting subject matter to heads ofstate, military leaders, royalty or other members of the ruling class. When the daguerreotype was prominent (1840-1860), early inventors andphotographers were well respected and belonged to the social elite. When the process was cheaper, people began going to photographicstudios, usually during special occasions such as weddings where aserious, dignified atmosphere was observed.

The well-respected natureof photography, elegant studio furnishings and the knowledge that apermanent image was being created, caused the atmosphere to be tenseand the portraits to appear rigid (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Becausefilm speeds were relatively slow, long exposures were necessary whichrequired subjects to remain stationary for long periods of time. However, in the later half of the Nineteenth century, impressionistpainters such as Vincent Van Gogh changed the manner in which manypeople constructed family portraits.

His paintings were of commonpeople in common situations causing a shift from formal to informalportraiture (Halle, 1991). Similar changes began to occur in thephotographic medium during the early Twentieth century. Streetphotographers began operating around family tourist attractions. Atthe time, few people owned a camera so it wasn't unusual to have thefamily's picture taken atthe beachby such photographers. As aresult, the clothing and poses became more relaxed and informal andthe backgrounds became more significant. These types of photos wereforerunners to the casual present-day family photograph.

By the 1920sand 1930s, photo albums included both formal studio portraiture andcarefree vacation shots (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Advances intechnology increased the ability of the average person to produceinformal vacation pictures. George Eastman had introduced the firstKodak camera in 1885. " You press the button, we do the rest," was thecompany's motto. Improvements continued, including introduction ofthe 35mm Leica in 1924 as well as technical advances such as smallercameras, faster films and flash. The scope of possible shootinglocations was increased with the invention of the flash.

Indoorphotography, where much of personal life is conducted, fell within therealm of the amateur photographer. Technical capabilities beganproviding intimate access to the home. Changes in technologyparalleled changes in behavior. As more people owned cameras andbecame familiar with their workings, the photographic process becameless intimidating, and the proliferation of the equipment beganchanging the content of the photographs (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). In addition, people simply became accustomed to being photographed. This in turn produced more casual situations, hence more causalsubjects.

In early photographs, the subjects were often posed, muchlike they had been for painters. The beach photographers offered amore relaxed style, but they too had the subjects stare straight intothe camera. A new kind of snapshot eventually would emerge that nowdominates photo albums. It shows a group of people engaged in someongoing activity, not necessarily looking at the camera. A downsidedoes exist to the proliferation of simple cameras. When they becameinexpensive and easy to use, they flourished in American society. However, trade-offs were inevitable.

The lack of need for technicalexpertise was counterbalanced by a lack of creative control. Point-and-shoot cameras are equipped with fixed-focus lenses andpre-set apertures ensuring that medium range shots are the norm(Trend, 1992). Photography has become easier and thus more popular. Everyone has the potential to take good family photographs especiallysince the introduction of color-negative film which allows moreexposure latitude. The subsequent rise in the number of photos takenconfirms this fact. In the Netherlands in 1960, the number of colorphotographs taken was 600, 000.

In 1974, it was 103 million (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). The easier-to-use cameras likely have acceleratedthe use of cameras by women to photograph their children. So eventhough the number of formal, solemn occasions is decreasing, thenumber of photographs is drastically increasing. Photographicrepresentation was possible as early as 1840. Yet society wasunprepared for such a revelation. An unplanned social processdeveloped that established which aspects of community life it wasappropriate to photograph (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). As a result, communities established norms that continue to have an effect onsubject matter.

Relationships between family members and amongrelatives are less formal and less controlled by religious and otherinstitutions outside of the family than in previous generations. Theinfluence of the church has diminished in some communities; therefore, ceremonies such as baptisms are less essential sources of familyrecord keeping. (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Although most occasionscan be photographed from a technical standpoint, social and ethicallimitations on subject matter remain. Arguments, fights, sickness, death and sex are rarely documented photographically. This hasn'talways been the case.

Dead children were photographed during thenineteenth century, sometimes lying in a cradle and sometimes beingheld in their mother's arms. In Austria, so many people went to photostudios with dead children that a publichealththreat was declaredand the government prohibited the practice (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Very few of these photographs exist today. It is likely that as theywere passed down in subsequent generations, and viewed as being inpoor taste and destroyed. Some researchers even believe that sexphotographs are becoming less taboo (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980).

Inany case, family albums are rarely a true and accurate depiction ofthe family. Objectivity always remains questionable. The idealizednuclear family- Say " cheese" " It's only smiles that count in photographs," states Laurie Taylor inher humorous view of the family photo album. She wonders if the blankstares in a photograph are a testament to the blissful beginning of anaffair, or evidence of its traumatic final days? Photographs offamily members often are constructed with a skewed concept of reality. They usually depict an idealized nuclear family, meaning a husband, wife and children, enjoying pleasurable moments.

In her book " FamilySnaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography," Patricia Holland says" The compulsive smiles in the snapshots of today insist on theexclusive claim of the family group to provide satisfying and enduringrelationships, just as the calm dignity of earlier pictures emphasizedthe formality of family ties. " The obsession with depicting thefamily as a united, happy entity is clear. In a study conducted byHalle, no head of the household's divorced spouse appeared in any ofthe pictures, and very few photographs depicted people as unhappy orlonely. The message is loud and clear.

Heterosexual marriage andchildren produce a fun and satisfying life. By far, most of thephotos showed the family at leisure, especially on overseas vacations. Formal pictures including those of people in business suits, militaryuniforms or wedding attire did exist, but only accounted for thirtypercent or less of the displayed photographs (Merz, 1988). Likewise, occasions in which a nuclear family would participate are depicted asfun. During the early 1960s, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieupublished a series of photographic essays that he titled Un art moyen.

Bourdieu wondered why so many people wanted cameras and why thepractice of photography was so widespread. He believed it was morethan just a natural occurrence. Bourdieu concluded that similaritiesexist within family photographs. In a French market survey heconducted from 1962 to 1963, he concluded that more than two-thirds ofthe amateur photographers he interviewed take their photographs almostexclusively at predictable moments. They photographed particularlyat ceremonies, meetings and holidays (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Seldom are the photos a complete and accurate depiction of reality.

Family image, not family history is depicted in the photographs thatare displayed. Major events that strongly influence peoples' livesare completely ignored. One of the most obvious situations that ismissing from the family album is work or anything to do with work(Merz, 1988). This is tragic because labor-related relationships andachievements form a substantial part of peoples' lives. Alsoconspicuously missing are photographs of dead children. Death andwork seem to be taboo subjects in most photo albums. Displaying photographs in the home

Celebration rituals such as weddings or Christenings are recorded; divorces and funerals are not (Merz, 1988). Even within theserituals, the emphasis remains on the family. A study found thatalmost all the photographs displayed in households were of familymembers (Halle, 1991). Very few photos of friends, colleagues andstrangers were present. Friends were seen in wedding photos, but theevent depicts the joyous creation of a nuclear family. The number offamily photographs that are displayed in households is surprising. Inone study, almost all households were found to display photographs(Halle, 1991).

As expected, the number of photos in a household wasgreater if the occupant had children or grandchildren. Although thiswasn't surprising, other factors such as gender were found to have aninfluence on decoration of the home. It was unusual that fewerphotographs were found in homes where the head of the household was amale who held an artistic job such as photographer, architect or filmmaker than for women in similar occupations. The discrepancy may haveresulted because women were more interested in the social aspects ofthe photograph as opposed to the aesthetic aspects (Halle, 1991).

Physical groupings also are important. Most family photographs aredisplayed in clusters. In one study, eighty-nine percent of familyphotographs were displayed in groups of four or more (Halle, 1991). Pictures are huddled together even if the people in them are not. People are very seldom presented alone. It is very rare to find aphoto of one person displayed by itself, especially when that personis an adult resident of the house. This occurred in less than onehalf of one percent of the households that were tested (Halle, 1991).

Children are often depicted alone, but they are too young to beexpected to maintain meaningful relationships. Those that aremeaningful are subject to transition. Today's highdivorcerate castsa shadow over the nuclear family. Thus, the method of displayingphotographs may signify the instability of modern-day relationships. Most pictures are likely to stand free on tables, dressers, mantles orother flat surfaces as opposed to walls. Only about a third of familyphotographs hang on walls. Photos that are not hung on walls are moreeasily interchanged and regrouped. Social Structure

Fundamental changes to American society and the family structure maybe hampering the production of ancestral photography (Halle, 1991). The ties that once bound children to their parents are no longerpresent. Nursinghomes, social security and pension plans haverelieved the youth from supporting their parents. Older people havebeen moving south to retirement communities, sometimes away from theirfamilies, so they can enjoy the warm weather. The manner in whichchildren relate to their parents has changed over the past fiftyyears, and the changing relationships may be reflected though thedisplay of photographs.

Between 42 and 62 percent of households in onestudy displayed pictures of at least one parent. (Halle, 1991). Thenumbers quickly decreased as further generations were explored. Aboutten percent of households displayed a picture of at least onegrandparent, and about three percent displayed a picture of greatgrandparents. Of course, it is possible that the families may haveowned pictures but simply did not display them. Social class appearsto be a factor in the display of photographs. Differences wereobserved between albums produced by middle-class families and familiesof lower income or working classes.

People with middle-classlifestyles had higher proportions of photographs of mutual friends andfriends of their children than working-class families (Gardner, 1991). Presumably due to increased social ties associated with more socialprominence. Working-class family albums included more pictures of thehusband's friends than the wife's. Segregatedfriendshippatterns arecommonly found among working-class couples where the male is in chargeof the household (Gardner, 1991). Working-class families' albums wereless kin oriented, but they see each other more often causinginteraction to become more routine.

As an event becomes common, it isless likely to be photographed. In addition to social classdifferences, cultural differences may be a factor in the display ofphotographs. Only one in 105 households that were included in asample displayed a school photograph of a child together withclassmates (Halle, 1991). The home was occupied by a Japanese couple. Japanese society tends to be more collective than American society. Role Behavior An examination of photo albums was made to determine if differencesoccurred in the portrayal of people as they assumed the role ofparents (Titus, 1976).

Repetitive patterns in the parenting role canbe observed through photographs including feeding, holding the childand interactions with relatives. Albums were examined to determine ifthe photographs of parents after they had their first child weredifferent than those after they had subsequent children. It wasassumed that parents would become accustomed to many of the rolechanges, and the subsequent photographs would reflect these changes. Photographs of mothers caring for their first child were far moreprevalent than with subsequent children (Titus, 1976).

The same wastrue of fathers. The number of solo portraits also decreased afterthe first child although this may not constitute a difference inaffection toward the first born, but simply an accustomization to newroles (Titus, 1976). Both the parents and the newborn child mustlearn new behavior. Parents may not have to re-learn their behaviorwith subsequent children. Even though one spouse may be more inclinedto take photographs, both spouses were significantly represented inparenting photographs (Titus, 1976).

However, most photographs werepredominately of pleasant tasks such as holding and feeding. While itmay have been necessary to hold children in order to present them tothe camera, this wouldn't have been the case when feeding. Picturesof parents feeding children were far more likely to occur with thefirst child. Very few photos of unpleasant tasks such as diaperingand bathing were included in the albums. Therapeutic uses of family photographs Photographs can prove to be an invaluable source of information whenresolving personal problems.

Photographs are not subject to memoryrecollection, and a person's portrayal of events can be quitedifferent from what appears in the photographs (Kaslow, 1979). Theinformation is intimate because family photographs are collected fromthe inside compared with journalistic institutions, which usuallyoperate as outsiders (Titus, 1976). Photo albums and home moviesprovide the richest sources ofmemoriesabout the family (Entin, 1979). They offer an intimate look at personal relationships. Psychologists recently have begun using this display of intimacy tohelp resolve family conflicts.

Photographs have the power to conjureup memories, sometimes painful, of bygone years. However, the reasonthat many people take photographs is to preserve happy memories. Whena relationship sours, the photographs that intentionally focus onhappy moments merely exacerbate the situation. It becomes painful toview all the " good times" without reference to the bad. Familyphotographs now are being used as a means of therapy to discuss thesechanges in lifestyles. The technique, often referred to asphototherapy, is effective because people from all socioeconomicgroups possess photos that can be discussed.

A review of familyphotographs can often prompt people to talk about family stories, goals, events and history. Not only does phototherapy help peopledeal with issues of the past, but it also helps renew relationships inthe present (Entin, 1979). The mere presentation of photographs canreveal much about the organization, chaos or fragmentation of aperson's life. If people's photo albums are disorganized andpartially complete, so too may be the case with their lives. Bygathering significant photos, patients often realize that pieces oftheir scrapbook are missing, prompting long overdue visits home.

Sometherapists are using family photo reconnaissance as a means of dealingwith sexual problems (Kaslow, 1979). Desires toward spouses can beinhibited if deaths of parents, children or loved ones are not fullymourned. Kaslow has found that couples with sexual problems oftenhave a resurgence in desire after reviewing their wedding album. Problems such as female frigidity are sometimes traced back to earlyphotographs of women patients. Many times they appear " sparklingclean, perfectly groomed and standing prim and proper" (Kaslow, 1979).

The way people feel about their bodies can be witnessed inphotographs. Baggy clothes could indicate a puritanical attitude orshame of the body leading to frigidity, impotence or infrequent sexualdesire (Kaslow, 1979). Body positioning such as slumping may indicatedepression just as an upright position could indicate confidence. Thesize and prominence of family members' portraits can indicateattitudes, such as favoritism, toward those portrayed (Entin, 1979). Presentation in inappropriate locations such as the bedroom may evencause sexual inhibition.

The storytelling nature of albums allowpsychologists to study patterns of photography to determine if changesin attitudes may be occurring. If a second child is photographedsignificantly more than the firstborn, psychologists may question thefamilies' expectations concerning sex or attractiveness of the firstborn and whether problems such as illegitimacy, handicap ordisfigurement may play a role (Entin, 1979). In her book " WaucomaTwilight: Generations of the Farm," Dona Schwartz describes the mannerin which her photographs provided a context during her interviews.

The photographs showed details of everyday life and the context inwhich events occurred in the community. The insight gained throughher own fieldwork and subjects' responses to pictures was morevaluable than the actual content of the photographs (Schwartz, 1992). She compared herinterviewprocess with Christopher Musello'sdescription of " family viewing contexts. " Musello believes familydiscussion of photographs establishes a " verbal context delineatingwhat should be attended to and what significances are located in theimage," (Musello, 1980).

Conclusions By viewing family photographs, much can be discovered about familystructures, relationships, and the self. Family photographs primarilyserve to remind people of good times with loved ones. This isapparent as the image of the nuclear family is constantly repeated inthe photo albums of most families. Much research remains to be done inthe study of family photographs. Even though American society isobsessed with presenting the image of a happy nuclear family, moreresearch should be conducted on the portrayal of alternativelifestyles.

Gay and lesbian couples, alternative families and singleparents need to have their family photographs analyzed to determine ifdiffering lifestyles significantly affect photo content. Also, photocontent produced during transitions in relationships such as divorces, separations and sibling rivalries needs to be studied. Additionally, content analysis of both American and foreign albums needs to beconducted to determine the degree to which cultural differences affectcontent. And finally, additional studies on the factors that affectediting decisions need to be conducted.

The literature review producedmuch information on the benefits of photographic analysis topsychologists. However, there was little information on the manner inwhich other professionals, such as journalists, could use theinterpretive meaning of photographs. Historical documents, such asfamily photographs, can provide essential background information aswell as indicate important people and relationships within a story. Through my research component, I intend to discover the manner inwhich journalists use historical documents to provide story context. Because online newspapers ave the capability to provide greatercontext due to the potential inclusion of sound and video, I also planto investigate the way emerging technologies might affect presentationof contextual information. [pic] References Boerdam, Jaap and Warna Oosterbaan Martinius. (Oct, 1980). " Family Photographs - A Sociological Approach," The Netherlands Journal ofSociology, v16, n2, pp. 95-119. Gardner, Saundra. (May, 1991). " Exploring the Family Album: Social Class Differences in Images of Family Life," Sociological Inquiry, v61, n2, pp. 242-251. Halle, David. Summer, 1991). " Displaying the Dream: The Visual Presentation of Family and Self in the Modern American Household," Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 22: pp. 217-229. Kaslow, Florence. (Summer, 1979). " What Personal Photos Reveal About Marital Sex Conflicts," Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy, 5: pp. 134-141. Merz, Caroline. (August, 1988). " Smile, please," New Statesman & Society, v1, n10, p. 42. Musello, Christopher. (1980). " Studying the Home Mode: An exploration of Family Photography and Visual Communication," Studies in Visual Communication, v6, n1, pp. 3-42. Saul, April. (August, 1992). " Compelling stories of 'private wars next door'," News Photographer, p. 45. Schwartz, Dona. (1992). " Waucoma Twilight: Generations of the Farm," Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. Taylor, Laurie. (August, 1993). " Camera Obscura," New Statesman & Society, v6: p. 21. Titus, Sandra L. (August, 1976). " Family Photographs and Transition to Parenthood," Journal of Marriage and the Family, 38: 525-530. Trend, David. (Feb, 1992). " Look who's talking: Narratives of Family Representations," Afterimage, v19, n7, p. 8.