


The meaning of family photographs

[Family](#)



The Meaning of Family Photographs By Charles Williams  | | Vanek family members dance. | The family is on vacation. A father takes out his point-and-shoot camera, poses his wife and kids and takes a quick snapshot. Eventually, the photograph is filed away in the family photo album. A meaningless activity? Maybe not. Everyday, thousands of family photographs are taken with little regard for the meaning of the recorded image. Much attention has been paid to scholars' views of domestic life.

However, relatively little attention has been paid to cultural productions, such as photo albums, that have been generated by families themselves (Trend, 1992). By neglecting discussion on this subject, scholars indicate that the home is not a place of serious academic work (Trend, 1992). But researchers increasingly are studying the meaning behind the photographs. April Saul won first place in the Feature Picture Story category at the 1992 Pictures of the Year competition for her portrayal of the American family. She believed that family struggles were an important topic of journalism. I hope what it [winning] means is that the everyday struggles of an American family are as valid in their own way as the struggles going on in Azerbaijan or Sarajevo -- and that the private wars next door can be as compelling as the bloody, public ones thousands of miles away. " Family photographs can be considered cultural artifacts because they document the events that shape families' lives. Thus, the recording of family history becomes an important endeavor. In many cases, photographs are the only biographical material people leave behind after they die (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980).

But, the impact of family photo albums extends beyond merely recording history. Interpretation of family structures, relationships and self is possible through viewing family photographs. The Meaning of family photographs Interpretation of meaning behind photographs assumes that they are a means of communication (Entin, 1979). Family photographs can tell a story. One photograph can be a mini-slice of an occurrence, but the accumulation of pictures begins to reveal threads of consistent themes and patterns. For all practical purposes, they become an informal photo essay.

Much like family storytelling, photographs indicate relationships within and among the family. Indeed, the family photo album is an easy way to initiate outsiders to family history (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Photographs provide an easy topic of conversation allowing potential family members, such as boyfriends or girlfriends, to be initiated into family structures and tradition. A key principle to consider when interpreting photographs is that they are produced by choice. Choices about who, what, when and where to photograph can say as much about the photographer as the subject.

The camera does not simply record an event but also records what the photographer chooses to see. Photographs are a statement about one's perception of the world. They are a reflection and definition of self. If that person has a happy family, then others may perceive him to be a good husband or wife. Parents' innocent snapshots are important in constructing their sense of identity (Merz, 1988). Traditionally, photographs have been taken from a male perspective. The father is most often absent from family photographs because he is the one who usually commands authority, poses the family and takes the picture (Trend, 1992).

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

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

The well-respected nature of photography, elegant studio furnishings and the knowledge that a permanent image was being created, caused the atmosphere to be tense and the portraits to appear rigid (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Because film speeds were relatively slow, long exposures were necessary which required subjects to remain stationary for long periods of time. However, in the later half of the Nineteenth century, impressionist painters such as Vincent Van Gogh changed the manner in which many people constructed family portraits.

His paintings were of common people in common situations causing a shift from formal to informal portraiture (Halle, 1991). Similar changes began to occur in the photographic medium during the early Twentieth century. Street photographers began operating around family tourist attractions. At the time, few people owned a camera so it wasn't unusual to have the family's picture taken at the beach by such photographers. As a result, the clothing and poses became more relaxed and informal and the backgrounds became more significant. These types of photos were forerunners to the casual present-day family photograph.

By the 1920s and 1930s, photo albums included both formal studio portraiture and carefree vacation shots (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Advances in technology increased the ability of the average person to produce informal vacation pictures. George Eastman had introduced the first Kodak camera in 1885. "You press the button, we do the rest," was the company's motto. Improvements continued, including introduction of the 35mm Leica in 1924 as well as technical advances such as smaller cameras, faster films and flash. The scope of possible shooting locations was increased with the invention of the flash.

Indoor photography, where much of personal life is conducted, fell within the realm of the amateur photographer. Technical capabilities began providing intimate access to the home. Changes in technology paralleled changes in behavior. As more people owned cameras and became familiar with their workings, the photographic process became less intimidating, and the proliferation of the equipment began changing 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 casual subjects.

In early photographs, the subjects were often posed, much like they had been for painters. The beach photographers offered a more relaxed style, but they too had the subjects stare straight into the camera. A new kind of snapshot eventually would emerge that now dominates photo albums. It shows a group of people engaged in some ongoing activity, not necessarily looking at the camera. A downside does exist to the proliferation of simple cameras. When they became inexpensive and easy to use, they flourished in American society. However, trade-offs were inevitable.

The lack of need for technical expertise was counterbalanced by a lack of creative control. Point-and-shoot cameras are equipped with fixed-focus lenses and pre-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 especially since the introduction of color-negative film which allows more exposure latitude. The subsequent rise in the number of photos taken confirms this fact. In the Netherlands in 1960, the number of color photographs taken was 600, 000.

In 1974, it was 103 million (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). The easier-to-use cameras likely have accelerated the use of cameras by women to photograph their children. So even though the number of formal, solemn occasions is decreasing, the number of photographs is drastically increasing. Photographic representation was possible as early as 1840. Yet society was unprepared for such a revelation. An unplanned social process developed that established which aspects of community life it was appropriate to

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photograph (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). As a result, communities established norms that continue to have an effect on subject matter.

Relationships between family members and among relatives are less formal and less controlled by religious and other institutions outside of the family than in previous generations. The influence of the church has diminished in some communities; therefore, ceremonies such as baptisms are less essential sources of family record keeping. (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Although most occasions can be photographed from a technical standpoint, social and ethical limitations on subject matter remain. Arguments, fights, sickness, death and sex are rarely documented photographically. This hasn't always been the case.

Dead children were photographed during the nineteenth century, sometimes lying in a cradle and sometimes being held in their mother's arms. In Austria, so many people went to photo studios with dead children that a public health threat was declared and the government prohibited the practice (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980). Very few of these photographs exist today. It is likely that as they were passed down in subsequent generations, and viewed as being in poor taste and destroyed. Some researchers even believe that sex photographs are becoming less taboo (Boerdam, Martinius, 1980).

In any case, family albums are rarely a true and accurate depiction of the family. Objectivity always remains questionable. The idealized nuclear family—*Say "cheese" "It's only smiles that count in photographs,"* states Laurie Taylor in her humorous view of the family photo album. She wonders if the blank stares in a photograph are a testament to the blissful beginning of an affair, or evidence of its traumatic final days? Photographs of family

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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 the exclusive claim of the family group to provide satisfying and enduring relationships, just as the calm dignity of earlier pictures emphasized the formality of family ties." The obsession with depicting the family as a united, happy entity is clear. In a study conducted by Halle, no head of the household's divorced spouse appeared in any of the pictures, and very few photographs depicted people as unhappy or lonely. The message is loud and clear.

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

Bourdieu wondered why so many people wanted cameras and why the practice of photography was so widespread. He believed it was more than just a natural occurrence. Bourdieu concluded that similarities exist within family photographs. In a French market survey he conducted from 1962 to 1963, he concluded that more than two-thirds of the amateur photographers

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he interviewed take their photographs almost exclusively at predictable moments. They photographed particularly at 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 that are displayed. Major events that strongly influence people's lives are completely ignored. One of the most obvious situations that is missing from the family album is work or anything to do with work (Merz, 1988). This is tragic because labor-related relationships and achievements form a substantial part of people's lives. Also conspicuously missing are photographs of dead children. Death and work 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 these rituals, the emphasis remains on the family. A study found that almost all the photographs displayed in households were of family members (Halle, 1991). Very few photos of friends, colleagues and strangers were present. Friends were seen in wedding photos, but the event depicts the joyous creation of a nuclear family. The number of family photographs that are displayed in households is surprising. In one study, almost all households were found to display photographs (Halle, 1991).

As expected, the number of photos in a household was greater if the occupant had children or grandchildren. Although this wasn't surprising, other factors such as gender were found to have an influence on decoration of the home. It was unusual that fewer photographs were found in homes where the

head of the household was a male who held an artistic job such as photographer, architect or filmmaker than for women in similar occupations. The discrepancy may have resulted because women were more interested in the social aspects of the photograph as opposed to the aesthetic aspects (Halle, 1991).

Physical groupings also are important. Most family photographs are displayed in clusters. In one study, eighty-nine percent of family photographs 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 a photo of one person displayed by itself, especially when that person is an adult resident of the house. This occurred in less than one-half of one percent of the households that were tested (Halle, 1991).

Children are often depicted alone, but they are too young to be expected to maintain meaningful relationships. Those that are meaningful are subject to transition. Today's high divorce rate casts a shadow over the nuclear family. Thus, the method of displaying photographs may signify the instability of modern-day relationships. Most pictures are likely to stand free on tables, dressers, mantles or other flat surfaces as opposed to walls. Only about a third of family photographs hang on walls. Photos that are not hung on walls are more easily interchanged and regrouped. Social Structure

Fundamental changes to American society and the family structure may be hampering the production of ancestral photography (Halle, 1991). The ties that once bound children to their parents are no longer present. Nursing homes, social security and pension plans have relieved the youth

from supporting their parents. Older people have been moving south to retirement communities, sometimes away from their families, so they can enjoy the warm weather. The manner in which children relate to their parents has changed over the past fifty years, and the changing relationships may be reflected through the display of photographs.

Between 42 and 62 percent of households in one study displayed pictures of at least one parent. (Halle, 1991). The numbers quickly decreased as further generations were explored. About ten percent of households displayed a picture of at least one grandparent, and about three percent displayed a picture of great-grandparents. Of course, it is possible that the families may have owned pictures but simply did not display them. Social class appears to be a factor in the display of photographs. Differences were observed between albums produced by middle-class families and families of lower income or working classes.

People with middle-class lifestyles had higher proportions of photographs of mutual friends and friends of their children than working-class families (Gardner, 1991). Presumably due to increased social ties associated with more social prominence. Working-class family albums included more pictures of the husband's friends than the wife's. Segregated friendship patterns are commonly found among working-class couples where the male is in charge of the household (Gardner, 1991). Working-class families' albums were less kin oriented, but they see each other more often causing interaction to become more routine.

As an event becomes common, it is less likely to be photographed. In addition to social class differences, cultural differences may be a factor in the display

of photographs. Only one in 105 households that were included in a sample displayed a school photograph of a child together with classmates (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 differences occurred in the portrayal of people as they assumed the role of parents (Titus, 1976).

Repetitive patterns in the parenting role can be observed through photographs including feeding, holding the child and interactions with relatives. Albums were examined to determine if the photographs of parents after they had their first child were different than those after they had subsequent children. It was assumed that parents would become accustomed to many of the role changes, and the subsequent photographs would reflect these changes. Photographs of mothers caring for their first child were far more prevalent than with subsequent children (Titus, 1976).

The same was true of fathers. The number of solo portraits also decreased after the first child although this may not constitute a difference in affection toward the first born, but simply an accustomization to new roles (Titus, 1976). Both the parents and the newborn child must learn new behavior. Parents may not have to re-learn their behavior with subsequent children. Even though one spouse may be more inclined to take photographs, both spouses were significantly represented in parenting photographs (Titus, 1976).

However, most photographs were predominately of pleasant tasks such as holding and feeding. While it may have been necessary to hold children in order to present them to the camera, this wouldn't have been the case when <https://assignbuster.com/the-meaning-of-family-photographs/>

feeding. Pictures of parents feeding children were far more likely to occur with the first child. Very few photos of unpleasant tasks such as diapering and bathing were included in the albums. Therapeutic uses of family photographs
Photographs can prove to be an invaluable source of information when resolving personal problems.

Photographs are not subject to memory recollection, and a person's portrayal of events can be quite different from what appears in the photographs (Kaslow, 1979). The information is intimate because family photographs are collected from the inside compared with journalistic institutions, which usually operate as outsiders (Titus, 1976). Photo albums and home movies provide the richest sources of memories about the family (Entin, 1979). They offer an intimate look at personal relationships. Psychologists recently have begun using this display of intimacy to help resolve family conflicts.

Photographs have the power to conjure up memories, sometimes painful, of bygone years. However, the reason that many people take photographs is to preserve happy memories. When a relationship sours, the photographs that intentionally focus on happy moments merely exacerbate the situation. It becomes painful to view all the "good times" without reference to the bad. Family photographs now are being used as a means of therapy to discuss these changes in lifestyles. The technique, often referred to as phototherapy, is effective because people from all socioeconomic groups possess photos that can be discussed.

A review of family photographs can often prompt people to talk about family stories, goals, events and history. Not only does phototherapy help people deal with issues of the past, but it also helps renew relationships in the

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present (Entin, 1979). The mere presentation of photographs can reveal much about the organization, chaos or fragmentation of a person's life. If people's photo albums are disorganized and partially complete, so too may be the case with their lives. By gathering significant photos, patients often realize that pieces of their scrapbook are missing, prompting long overdue visits home.

Some therapists are using family photo reconnaissance as a means of dealing with sexual problems (Kaslow, 1979). Desires toward spouses can be inhibited if deaths of parents, children or loved ones are not fully mourned. Kaslow has found that couples with sexual problems often have a resurgence in desire after reviewing their wedding album. Problems such as female frigidity are sometimes traced back to early photographs of women patients. Many times they appear "sparkling clean, perfectly groomed and standing prim and proper" (Kaslow, 1979).

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

The storytelling nature of albums allows psychologists to study patterns of photography to determine if changes in attitudes may be occurring. If a second child is photographed significantly more than the firstborn, <https://assignbuster.com/the-meaning-of-family-photographs/>

psychologists may question the families' expectations concerning sex or attractiveness of the firstborn and whether problems such as illegitimacy, handicap or disfigurement may play a role (Entin, 1979). In her book "Waucoma Twilight: Generations of the Farm," Dona Schwartz describes the manner in which her photographs provided a context during her interviews.

The photographs showed details of everyday life and the context in which events occurred in the community. The insight gained through her own fieldwork and subjects' responses to pictures was more valuable than the actual content of the photographs (Schwartz, 1992). She compared her interview process with Christopher Musello's description of "family viewing contexts." Musello believes family discussion of photographs establishes a "verbal context delineating what should be attended to and what significances are located in the image," (Musello, 1980).

Conclusions By viewing family photographs, much can be discovered about family structures, relationships, and the self. Family photographs primarily serve to remind people of good times with loved ones. This is apparent as the image of the nuclear family is constantly repeated in the photo albums of most families. Much research remains to be done in the study of family photographs. Even though American society is obsessed with presenting the image of a happy nuclear family, more research should be conducted on the portrayal of alternative lifestyles.

Gay and lesbian couples, alternative families and single parents need to have their family photographs analyzed to determine if differing lifestyles significantly affect photo content. Also, photo content produced during transitions in relationships such as divorces, separations and sibling rivalries

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needs to be studied. Additionally, content analysis of both American and foreign albums needs to be conducted to determine the degree to which cultural differences affect content. And finally, additional studies on the factors that affected editing decisions need to be conducted.

The literature review produced much information on the benefits of photographic analysis to psychologists. However, there was little information on the manner in which other professionals, such as journalists, could use the interpretive meaning of photographs. Historical documents, such as family photographs, can provide essential background information as well as indicate important people and relationships within a story. Through my research component, I intend to discover the manner in which journalists use historical documents to provide story context. Because online newspapers have the capability to provide greater context due to the potential inclusion of sound and video, I also plan to investigate the way emerging technologies might affect presentation of contextual information. [pic]

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