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# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies

## Family Photography

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Daniel Thomas Cook

Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies

Chapter Title: "Family Photography"

Pub. Date: 2020

Access Date: July 8, 2020

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781473942929

Online ISBN: 9781529714388

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529714388.n273>

Print pages: 750-753

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This entry discusses the sociocultural and political implications of family photographs, particularly in terms of their contributions to the constructions of children and childhoods. Rather than centering the prototypical White, middle-class families featured in Western and European photographs across history, this essay aims to center the experiences and images of photographers, families, and children from marginalized communities. To highlight the shifting subjectivities of children and of families, the entry concludes with a discussion of children's renditions of family photos.

As Pierre Bourdieu noted in his 1965 book *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, the “family photograph is a ritual of the domestic cult in which the family is both subject and object” (p. 19), and perhaps no one is more the object and subject than the child within family photos. Operating at the intersection of the private (personal memories, family events, and everyday life) and the public (histories of social and cultural formation), family photography (also referred to as *domestic photography*) provides dynamic insights into childhoods constructed by adults. Childhoods are produced through family photographs taken and cared for by caregivers, and just as families are shaped by larger sociopolitical forces and state power, pictures of families are influenced by contemporary conventions of photography and public discourses around class, race, gender, ability, citizenship, and so on. Family photographs reflect trends such as the polished, professional photos that gained popularity at the turn of the 21st century and for which some middle-class American families pay to have taken in their sparkling, curated homes and well-kept backyards and in public spaces like parks or iconic places. In these kinds of images, members of the family often wear matching or complementary clothing, perform a posed spontaneity, and project a normative sort of middle-class joy into the future. In traditional family photos like these, the child is the centerpiece, either as the object that provokes that joy or as the gendered, able-bodied subject, as an example. Girls may be depicted in beautiful dresses; boys in bountiful action. These images situate families within social and cultural histories and reflect photographic conventions of class, gender, race, and religion.

Family photographs, beyond objects, are cultural practices in and of themselves. The cultural critic and novelist Susan Sontag claimed that it hardly mattered what families photographed for their domestic albums as long as there existed pictures to locate the family unit in space and time. While this may be the case, it does seem to matter that pictures transmit the proper affects. Frequently staged and heavily edited, mainstream domestic pictures tend to present families as coherent, leaving their more dysfunctional or challenging moments out of the frame. Moments in which these pictures are produced also operate within relations of power in which adults have traditionally had power to construct children's images in and through photographs. Parents encourage, or coerce, particular forms of engagement from children with the camera as they direct children to “smile for the camera” or tease them for not doing so. At times, the camera is in constant operation, in the hands of adults who are in pursuit of the *right* image that adds to the perfectly curated life. This staging of images lends power to the photo to exemplify the *ideal* family, whether it be the family that is quite ordinary or the one that proudly asserts its extraordinariness. This idealized image is unrelenting, in spite of the visibility of the staging, production, and performance of the family. While we are all well aware of the high production value (via high-quality cameras and photo editing equipment and skills) of particular photos, it is the affective force, paired with the normalizing function, of images that nonetheless works to produce the aesthetics of the family. At the heart of this ideal is the child who completes the notion of a family. The absence of photographs of young children in a family can be read as parental negligence to engage in the typical cultural practices of domesticity and therefore a departure from the sentimental conventions of domestic photography.

Domestic photographs have been used to examine the multiple dimensions of family spaces, and feminist geographers have taken interest in sentimentalized versions of the family photo to understand the relationships among motherhood, familial images, and domesticity. Gillian Rose, a sociologist studying family photographs since the early 21st century, brought to light the family photo as a point of pride for the mothers who appear in her work on these vernacular kinds of images. The pictures taken by the maternal figures in the households were referential, pointing to which people were present and their positions within the family. Family photos mark membership, as well as periods of stability and the inverse, turmoil. Those missing from images across

particular time frames can indicate familial unrest, and those frequently photographed may hold central positions within the family. On that note, sociologists of childhood can look to family photo albums to examine the positions children hold within their familial networks and thus to illustrate the contours of childhood. In the case of children, family photos mark growth and development. They are irrefutable and referential markers of aging, much like the makeshift height charts that are inscribed on walls at home. So importantly, the pictures mark the *development* of children, as in the case of photographs of *firsts* outlined by Rose: first baths, visitors, outings, smiles, solid food, tooth, shoes, swim, flight, and so forth. These firsts, additionally, are nearly always in relation to the mother figure. The pictures are scientific inscriptions of development and simultaneously inscribe the mother and her work by stretching out domestic space so that any viewers looking at the images are brought into relation with the family.

## The Politics of Family Photographs

Family photos are more than a private matter. They have critical and ideological significance and, therefore, have been studied across multiple fields including cultural studies, history, education, and public health. Not only have photographs had a role in the construction of idealized versions of families, but these renditions have also been firmly tied to a particular type of family. The literature on family photographs is overwhelmingly focused on images of heteronormative, middle-class, White families. Shawn Michelle Smith, in theorizing the family photograph album as a site where cultural identities are contested and negotiated, points out a historical aspect of family albums not to be overlooked: These ancestral relics served as evidentiary documentation during the height of the eugenics movement in the late 1800s to early 1900s. Family albums were part of a social institution in and through which heredity was tracked and charted. Inevitably, the family unit was a focal point around which discourses of race and ability were produced. Children, therefore, were inscribed within desired orders. Historian and evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould asserted, for example, that eugenicist Henry Goddard doctored photographs of the Kallikaks, a family Goddard described as *feeble-minded*. Gould's claims that Goddard retouched images in order to create more threatening looks from the Kallikak children have been refuted by others, but the fact remains that these family photos were deployed in the interest of the eugenics movement. Similarly, Smith draws out baby pictures, in particular, as the medium through which middle-class White familial networks would be normalized and institutionalized. The family, as a public-facing social unit, would be held to the standards of the kinds of European, middle-class, abled families that were insistently targeted for sales by the Eastman Kodak Company (founded in 1888).

That said, contemporary photographers and scholars have offered disruptions to the prevailing myths and ideologies reflected in stereotyped family photographs. Domestic pictures potentially deconstruct and respond to hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and national identity within our shared social order. Photographers like Sally Mann, Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie, Carrie Mae Weems, Dorothea Lange, Mary Berridge, and Albert Chong, among others, have played with the genre to re-present families in their projects. Mann's images of her daughters posing in ways that trouble traditional notions of childhood, Tsinhnahjinnie's retoolings of historical indigenous portraits, Weems's exploration of domesticity through the Kitchen Table series and archetype of a Black mother, Lange's focus on migrant families and Japanese internment communities, Berridge's depictions of the lives of autistic individuals and HIV-positive mothers, and Chong's integration of portraits with government documents; all ostensibly rework the otherwise banal archives of family photographs.

Meanwhile, scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois, bell hooks, Tina Campt, Gary Okhiro, Deborah Willis, and the Family Camera Network have exhibited and/or studied family photos of minoritized communities in order to highlight photographs' positions as sites of resistance and refusals of White supremacy. These are images simultaneously of cultural formation and of desired futurities: both how we came to be and how we want to be seen. Tina Campt's *Image Matters*, in its examination of 20th-century Black European subjects through family photographs, emphasizes African Americans' negotiations of cultural identity and feelings of belonging to the state. Du Bois's 1900 exhibit in the American Negro Exhibit offered intractable visual evidence to challenge extended histories of racial, and racist, taxonomy. The 363 photographs Du Bois presented (that would win

him the gold medal in the Paris Exposition that year) were a direct response to the use of family photographs by eugenicists to determine racial hierarchies. The Family Camera Network collects domestic photos, extending their definition of *family* beyond typical biological structures of the familial to larger networks. For minoritized populations—including transnational individuals, refugees, immigrants, people of color, queer folks, and others—family extends to communal care networks, revealing much about cultural dislocations and contemporary patterns of migration. Photographs in the Family Camera Network’s counterarchives are deliberately positioned as a political tool. They contest misreadings and offer alternative narratives to expand notions of normal (White, middle-class) families. These scholars’ (and others’) analyses of images account for social, cultural, historical, and political shifts, in combination with families’ lived experiences. The estrangements from the stereotypical, heteronormative, White, and/or middle-class families represented in dominant canons are conscious attempts to present powerful counternarratives and counterimages.

## Children’s Depictions of Family

Finally, while adult scholars and researchers like Valerie Walkerdine and Jo Spence have used their own family photos to examine their perspectives of self and family later as adults, children and youth have also had a hand in reconstructing images of the family via research and art endeavors. Wendy Ewald’s collaborative photo projects, across four decades starting from the 1980s, with children and families around the world—primarily minoritized populations such as indigenous communities in Canada and Latin America—merge photography with education and activism. Through photographs that children and family members take and manipulate (writing directly on images, e.g.), Ewald and her participants emphasize the complexity underneath superficial photographic accounts of children and families. Children’s and families’ subjectivities are presented plainly through the manipulation of photographs, as well as captions developed *by* the children themselves. Ewald’s recognition in children’s capacities to represent their own positions within their sociocultural spaces, including within their families, made space for new ways of seeing children and families. Similarly, Jim Hubbard’s organization *Shooting Back* sought to give children and youth advanced photographic skills and a platform to tell us more about their lives. He worked in the late 20th century specifically with homeless children and youth in Chicago, as well as First Nations youth on reservations. In both projects, the children and youth took candid photographs of their families; these images supplant and surpass typically deficit-framed photographs that may otherwise surface of these populations.

Within critical childhood and youth studies, sociologist Wendy Luttrell has worked with working-class and immigrant children to take photographs across a 12-year longitudinal study in the earliest years of the 21st century. The children (who would later become the youth) photographed their homes, neighborhoods, and schools. In contrast to Gillian Rose’s study of middle-class White mothers in the United Kingdom, the immigrant mothers and mothers of color in Luttrell’s work were subjects, framed by the children and oftentimes imaged in the kitchen as part of the children’s larger narratives around mothers’ care work. As part of her collaborative seeing approach, the children also talked about their images, and along with the photos, the interviews revealed the centrality of familial care in the children’s everyday lives. Luttrell’s larger point, in a forthcoming book, has to do with the invisible and undervalued choreographies of care and relationships of interdependence that animate children’s everyday lives. While families from minoritized communities are often thought of as lacking care, particularly for their children’s educational success, the photographs and narratives presented by the children-turned-youth in Luttrell’s work indicate otherwise.

See also [Children as Photographers](#); [Photovoice, Research Method of](#)

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