

# **Representing the Family through Photographs**

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## *Abstract*

Visual analysis through family photographs on display around the home is a viable way to study the constructed presentations of family life. Such analysis provides insight into how families attempt to construct an image of their lifestyle in the home. However, previous research on this subject has not fully examined if social class affects the way families represent themselves through photography. More specifically, research needs to be conducted looking at middle and upper class families to discover any differences in the occasions they photograph and display, and more importantly, how these images relate to presentation of self. Four interviews were conducted with upper class mothers, four interviews were conducted with middle class mothers, and five students were interviewed. Further, a content analysis of the photographs on display in their respective homes was conducted, and it was found that leisure activities differ according to class: the upper class families in the study tend to emphasize travel photographs, while middle class families largely displayed their children's activities. In the upper class, the emphasis on travel was reinforced through Christmas cards and professional photographs, while in the middle class, travel was reinforced through Christmas cards if opportunities for vacations arose, and was not an activity in professional photographs at all.

## *Introduction*

Photography is commonly used by American families not only to remember the good times and to commemorate milestones, but also to present a constructed, positive image of the family to an audience as well as to themselves. In choosing which family photographs are displayed around the house, which are sent out as cards to family and friends, and which are just buried in drawers, families are subconsciously creating a reality and a certain presentation of self (Blinn 1988, Halle 1991, Hirsch 1981, Gardner 1991, Reiakvam 1993, Williamson 1994). For this reason, visual analysis through photographs is a viable way to study family systems and the idealized images families strive to project.

Previous research has discovered a link between this desire for a positive presentation of family life with the achievement of the American Dream. (Gardner 1991, Hochschild 1996, Halle 1991, Hirsch 1981). Families consistently display photographs that show a close bond between family members and project the image of an idyllic, harmonious family. However, previous research has not fully examined if social class affects the way families represent themselves through photography. More specifically, research needs to be conducted looking at middle and upper class families to discover any differences in the occasions they photograph and display, and more importantly, how these images relate to presentation of self.

Since scholars have paid little attention to the occasions families choose to document and display, and how social class may affect this choice, further research on this topic is necessary. In the United States, a large gap used to exist between those who could afford to own pictures of themselves and those who couldn't, but in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, this gap narrowed with the availability of cameras to the general public

(Williamson 1994). Now, family photographs appear in all houses, regardless of social class. What might be different among the classes are the content, occasions, and types of photographs families display. The private sphere “is the arena for pictorial representation of major topics of this particular culture, the family, domestic sphere, and leisure time” (Reiakvam 1993: 40). For this reason, it would be fruitful to study family photographs on display around the home because these images could reveal information about the aspirations, ideals, and values concerning family life among different social classes. By examining the family photographs on display, insight can be gained on how photographs are a statement of a family’s perception of self as well as how they wish to be perceived. For example, do families take pictures of special occasions or rituals, or do they value leisure time and therefore take pictures portraying their families relaxing and having fun? What is their interpretation of these photographs and what does it say about self-presentation?

Research has yet to link these questions to differences between the middle and upper classes, and findings in this area will shed light on how families from these respective classes strive to present themselves to the public. “In subtle and unconscious ways, these glimpses of life are then carefully interwoven and used to construct a patterned view or perspective that visualizes what is valued or preferred...” (Chalfen 1987: 98). Patterns about the events and occasions displayed in homes of middle and upper class families will serve to identify these cultural values and glean information on an aspect of family photography that has been neglected by previous researchers.

*Literature Review/Theory*

Richard Chalfen's work provides a theoretical framework specifically related to family photographs in that he is studying what "people are 'saying' about themselves when they make snapshots and home movies [and] what they are expressing about their lives..." (Chalfen 1987: 2). Chalfen examines photographs through his concept of home mode communication, which is "a pattern of interpersonal and small group communication centered around the home" (Chalfen 1987: 8). He emphasizes that taking photographs or home videos is a form of social communication, which directly affects presentation of self. "For instance, examples will be given of how there are social pressures for people to make snapshots of their children when they are smiling rather than crying, when they are healthy rather than hurt or ill..." (Chalfen 1987: 8). Further, there is a neglect of photographs portraying daily activities because, while families increasingly value leisure activities, they only display times where the family is seen as a close, cohesive unit. Every family, despite social class, wants to be portrayed in a positive, socially acceptable way. By using Chalfen's framework, one can examine "when, where, with whom, under what conditions, and for what reason people are observed to be participating in any part of home mode communication" (Chalfen 1987: 18).

Chalfen's term "Kodak culture" is used to look at the unconsciously learned ways individuals express ideas, values, and knowledge through home mode communication. "Kodak culture appears to be designed and maintained by cultural and social prescriptions that remain in people's minds and are guided by public sentiment" (Chalfen 1987: 47). In other words, while taking photographs in many instances seems voluntary, there is actually social and cultural pressure to take pictures of certain occasions and events. For example, almost every family takes pictures to document the birth of their

child, and even from this young age, people tend to display only the photographs of clean babies in the nursery. Similarly, there is pressure to take pictures of formal events, like special occasions and holidays, which “contributes to a sense of continuity and a reassuring redundancy to the entire collection” (Chalfen 1987: 83). In this way, family photography rarely deviates from the norm of presenting the traditional, happy family; this sense of redundancy and consistency is comforting to families because deviating from these ideals could result in judgment. Photography is also used to celebrate a juncture and turning point in children’s and adults’ lives, where a new status or identity is generally achieved. Chalfen uses photographs of education, like graduations, and pictures from weddings as examples of this. So, Chalfen’s work provides background knowledge to help understand the main ideas surrounding previous research that has been conducted on family photographs, such as constructed reality, presentation of self, and the occasions often photographed.

One of the main tenets of family photography that scholars have examined is families’ construction of reality through photographs that may not be entirely representative of their daily life (Gardner 1991, Hochschild 1996, Walker 1989). “The family snapshot is more than a copy of the world, rather it is the family photographer’s statement about, or perception of that world” (Gardner 1991: 243). These moments reflect an individual’s perception of his/her social world, and this perception is often in line with society’s norms and standards in regards to family life. By rejecting certain photographs for display, and more importantly, in selecting what is photographed in the first place, the family is constructing a particular view of reality and of their family life (Gardner 1991). The images displayed show conformity to certain cultural ideas like

“living a comfortable life, maintaining a happy growing family, and living in social contexts where people get along with one another” (Gardner 1991: 243). This process is evident among most families, despite social class and is linked to the American Dream, which is deeply embedded in society and heavily affects a family’s construction of reality through photographs (Chalfen 1987, Gardner 1991, Hoschilts 1996, Halle 1991, Hirsch 1981). Success in terms of the American Dream is not only monetary; it also includes a feeling of belonging, and having a healthy, happy family is part of this dream. Therefore, images that families display will most likely be ones that depict the achievement of the American Dream by portraying a traditional, harmonic family. An examination of photographs that come in store-bought frames helps understand how deeply embedded this expectation to present an image of an idyllic family is in our society.

Seven photographs randomly chosen from an aisle in Wal-Mart project the same image: family members embracing, smiling, bonding, or engaging in a family activity. These pictures give the impression that family life is a place free of strife and hardship through the family’s carefree, loving smiles and embraces. All of these pictures are deliberately posed; in some the subjects are smiling at the camera, while others attempt to appear candid, with family members looking at each other. In all of them however, despite the location and content, the family is presented as a cohesive unit.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Additionally, as previous scholars have noted, family photographs tend to adhere to traditional family roles (Hirsch 1981, Reiakvam 1993), which depict the mother as loving, nurturing, and in charge of the children, while the fathers are mainly there to provide economic support. Photographs in store-bought frames depict families according to these roles. If there is a photograph with only one parent and a child, that parent is always the mother (See Figure 3). Even in pictures where the entire family is presented, the mother is generally the one who is embracing the child while the father is positioned next to them (See Figures 2 and 4). Furthermore, there is an absence of detailed backgrounds in these photographs, which places the emphasis on the family members and upholds the notion that family is what matters. American families see these images constantly and therefore imitate them in their own family photographs to create a sense of

security and to show that societal expectations are being achieved. Williamson examines this idea through photography in the public sphere, which is where the norms in our society come from. She says families constantly look at representations of other families and are then encouraged to portray themselves in that manner (Williamson 1994: 237).



Figure 3



Figure 4

As evident through previous research on family photographs as well as through examples of photographs that come in store bought frames, most families take pictures that adhere to this idea of the American dream and the traditional, happy family. Individuals recognize that there isn't always a connection between reality and the photographic image, "that they deliberately cover up as much as they disclose, that they distort as much as they display" (Walker 1989: 168) in order to achieve this image. This common practice of distorting reality in photographs is intertwined with the idealized presentation of self and family.

Goffman and Cooley provide a theoretical framework to understand why people selectively choose photographs to be on display and how, in doing so, they are engaging in a form of self-presentation. Goffman examines the way society influences individuals' daily performances (Goffman 1959). Further, he attempts to analyze daily life through the idea that not only all of the actions we perform, but also the meanings we give those actions, are social in nature. In other words, reality is socially constructed and therefore, there are certain norms and values dominating our society that influence the way we view ourselves, the way we perform, and the way others view us. Goffman examines this through his dichotomy of front stage, which is how one acts in a public setting, and back stage, which is how one acts when alone (Goffman 1959). An individual's front stage persona changes with each situation to reflect society's normative ideas, which allow one to be presented in the best light. This presentation of self directly relates to the selective process of choosing photographs for display because families attempt to project a positive image of themselves. They want to remember the good times; the times that illustrate a close bond among family members, whether during leisure activities or formal events.

Additionally, Charles Cooley's concept of the "Looking Glass Self" will shed light onto the thinking process people apply when taking photos and displaying them. He says that people are constantly in conversation with themselves about how they are perceived by others and how others judge or make inferences based on that appearance. There are three prongs to this approach: the way we think we appear to others, the way we think other people judge that appearance, and how we feel about this and how we moderate our behavior to control this possible judgment (Cooley 1902: 152). This idea of being judged based on appearance is one of the main reasons family photographs always seem to project this harmonious image, despite social class. If the results of this study demonstrate that differences in the occasions displayed in middle class homes versus

upper class homes exist, Cooley's concept will help understand how this presentation of self is connected to a desire to adhere to the norms and values of a certain class.

As Goffman and Cooley have illustrated, individuals present a constructed image of themselves depending on their social settings, which is helpful in understanding how the act of displaying certain family photographs is also a presentation of self. Numerous studies have found that people hardly ever keep pictures depicting a family member as unhappy, lonely, or angry, whether they be in an album or on display around the home (Halle 1991, Gardner 1991, Blinn 1989, Williamson 1994). Williamson says that this portrayal of "fun in the picture, smiles and jolly moments frozen into one of those objects creates the systematic misrepresentation of childhood and family life" (Williamson 1994: 239). Family picture taking relates to self-image in two ways. The first is mystification, where the goal of the photographer is to display the family in the best possible manner (family members look happy, satisfied, close, attractive). Further, "it may reflect a desire to portray the family as it is hoped to appear rather than how it actually appears" (Blinn 1989: 18). The other is demystification, where the family is presented in a silly light, but the same goal of appearing tight-knit and unified is achieved. Similarly, Reiakvam views family photographs as in interpretation of reality, which means that they are also an inventor of reality (Reiakvam 1993: 40). He says that it is impossible for the audience to know what was happening before or after the photograph was taken; the photograph could portray something altogether different from what was actually happening.

This raises the question of what is suppressed in family photographs. Halle examines this issue and finds that the dark side of family life, such as divorce, deaths, or even arguments is suppressed from the overt content of photographs (Halle 1991: 225). In his study, he found that in order to reinforce the togetherness of family life and combat the darker side, pictures are often displayed in clusters. One picture displayed on its own

is rare. This may be because people recognize the fragility of life, and if something were to happen, like a death or divorce, taking away a picture and replacing it would be less noticeable within a cluster of photographs. Rose takes a different approach in understanding the reasoning behind displaying family photographs in clusters. Her findings, similarly to Halle's, suggest that photographs are "about family membership, about marking the frequency of happy family times" (Rose 12), so the more pictures displayed together, the better sense the audience gets that family time is frequent. However, unlike Halle, she sees these clusters as ways to update children's progress through time, not to hide divorce and death. Walker takes a similar stance; he found when pictures are presented in sets, they undermine the idea of isolation (Walker 1989: 159). He looks mainly at family albums, but his analysis is useful in framing the idea of self-presentation through photographs because, similarly to albums, photographs on display are constructed with a certain audience in mind.

Lastly, within this theme of self-presentation, studies have illustrated that it is mainly the parents' memories and their construction of reality that family photographs represent, since it is the parents who generally take and select the photographs (Williamson 1994, Tinkler 2008). "So children are offered a 'memory' of their childhoods, made up of images constructed entirely by others" (Williamson 1994: 241). For instance, of the photographs that parents choose to display or put in albums, pictures where a child is on his/her best behavior are common. An example Williamson gives is from her own experience with family pictures; she says that she always grew up with the perception that she was a very helpful, gracious big sister as demonstrated through pictures. Family members who were there at the time might say otherwise. So, based on these pictures, children will form their childhood memories (Williamson 1994). Penny Tinkler's study reinforces this idea in that adults attempt to capture positive identities of

their children on camera. “Sometimes these portraits represent identities that are marginalized in everyday life” (Tinkler 2008: 259). So, a glamorized version of the self is often presented. As previous studies suggest, families attempt to portray themselves as a tight-knit, fun-loving unit by eliminating pictures that do not uphold this image. However, not many of the studies focused on the photographs on display in the home; many focused on albums instead, and they did not take into account how social class might affect a family’s presentation of self.

Another theme scholars present deals with the occasions often photographed, but more specifically, the idea that photographs are often divided into two groups: formal occasions and leisure activities (Williamson 1994, Halle 1991, Hirsch 1981, Gardner 1991, Walker 1989). Williamson talks specifically about this split of occasions by categorizing formal occasions as events like weddings, christenings, and graduations. She says these are events where professional photographers are often used. “The formal are a record, a kind of proof that the traditional landmarks of life have been reached, and these pictures have much in common with early “posed” family photos” (Williamson 1994: 239). On the other hand, informal photographs would be of holidays and other leisure time spent with the family (Williamson 1994). This emphasis on leisure activities brings a new element to what families value, the necessity of having fun. Hirsch sees a similar dichotomy between formal occasions and leisure activities. She states that in terms of the more formal photographs, those of rituals and ceremonies, people do not care about specifics, like whether the parents of the bride or groom are divorced, they want to show that the tradition of marriage is being honored (Hirsch 1981: 62). In opposition to formal photographs, vacation pictures, while a break in daily routine also “illustrate the strength of our ties. ‘Even here,’ they seem to say, ‘we still were a family’” (Hirsch 1981: 68).

This desire to project an image of closeness and family fun through photographs of all occasions, whether formal or leisure, relates back to constructed presentations of self.

Both Williamson and Hirsch discuss how professional photographers are more likely to be elicited for formal photographs, such as weddings or special occasions, while candid, amateur photography is used for documenting leisure activities. In photographs of formal occasions, families try to exude an ideal of togetherness even while documenting an important event, and hiring a professional helps achieve this look. Further, formal photographs “permit us to look *at* the family, not *into* it, and present us at best with a few ethical principles about how parents and children ought to look” (Hirsch 1981: 97). Candid pictures are more relaxed and deal with personality while focusing on the types of activities families enjoy.

Within this dichotomy of formal versus leisure, scholars have found that Americans have a tendency to display photographs of family in leisure activities rather than at formal occasions (Halle 1991, Williamson 1994). In her study, Williamson found that a recent trend among American families is to display images of pleasure and leisure. “The dominant content, in home family photography, seems always to be pleasure” (Williamson 1994: 239). Similarly, in his study of photographs on display in lower, middle, and upper class homes, Halle found that a crucial goal in life is to spend pleasurable moments with family members (Halle 1991: 217) “Most of the family photos on display depict families at leisure-in the backyard, at the beach, on trips and outings within the United States, and above all, on vacations abroad” (Halle 1991: 224).

This tendency to display photographs taken outside of the local community is another theme literature on family photographs has covered (Gardner, 1991 Walker 1989, Halle 1991). According to Gardner, middle class photographs are likely to show broad geographical boundaries. In other words, they would be more likely to take photographs

in other states, or even abroad, whereas the lower class tends to take pictures near home (Gardner 1991: 247). This is in comparison to the lower class, so it would be interesting to see if there is a difference among the middle and upper classes. Are upper class families more likely to display photographs from abroad and middle class families from vacations in the States? Additionally, Walker finds that the most common family photo albums are travel or vacation albums because they document that traveling has occurred and fun was had with the family, even away from home. Also, another common album is that of special interest or hobby; this would constitute a sport or extra-curricular activity. While his study focuses on family albums, it illustrates that certain occasions, vacations and hobbies, are generally valued most, and this may carry over into the actual display of photographs around the home. His emphasis on hobbies or extra-curricular activities brings up an important link that previous contributors have not discussed: how other leisure activities, like sports or extra-curricular activities, would play into the displays in middle and upper class homes.

It would be interesting to see if extra-curricular activities, such as sports, dance, or music, play a larger role in displays among middle or upper classes, and if so, what it says about the particular values of the classes. "Social class fosters values which, in turn, affect our daily interactions with spouses, children, and friends" (Hughes 1996). Based on previous research about parenting techniques among the classes, it would seem plausible that middle class homes would depict more family photographs where their children are engaged in extra-curriculars than upper class families, but this has not been researched yet. For instance, both Lareau and Kohn study parents' interactions with children and find that in middle class homes, mothers and fathers play an active role in supporting their child. They are very prominent in guiding their children in a direction that leads to success within societal institutions. Lareau uses concerted cultivation, the

parenting practice of the middle class, to differentiate from the lower class parents, who engage in accomplishment of natural growth. Middle class families heavily value pushing their children through highly scheduled activities, such as sports, choir, piano lessons, and dance. They think these activities help foster certain values and skills, such as leadership and competitiveness, that make it easier for their children to succeed in the future (Lareau 2003). With this in mind, because these activities are highly valued among middle class parents, and parents are the ones who display photographs around the home, there might be a connection between other leisure activities, like sports, and family photographs. Further, there may even be a difference between the types of sports displayed in these homes. For instance, upper class families may be more likely to display photographs of individual sports, like tennis and golf, which require membership to clubs and expensive equipment, whereas middle class families may be more likely to participate in group sports, like football or soccer.

Lastly, in terms of the content of the photographs, scholars have noted that photographs on display generally only portray family members; pictures of non-kin, such as friends or colleagues, are lacking. Further, if they do appear, it is generally in a picture that is somehow highlighting the family member (Halle 1991). “Even when non-kin are depicted, they rarely appear in their own right as the main topic of the photograph. On the contrary, they are usually part of a context which highlights kin relations and above all, the nuclear family” (Halle 1991: 222). An example of this would be a wedding photo, with the bride and groom as the focus and their friends in the wedding party off to the side. Another example illustrating this emphasis on family members is through photographs of education. It used to be common for parents to buy a copy of their child’s yearly class photograph. Nowadays, many schools have moved towards individual shots of children rather than class photographs. Additionally, even if families have class

pictures, they are unlikely to display them, and much more likely to display the one of just their child (Halle 1991). This emphasizes the significance families place on individual or personal photographs. Families want to focus on personality and the relationships among family members, and according to Hirsch, families do this through photographs with plain or non-distinguishable backgrounds, like a school photograph (Hirsch 1981). This type of photograph is not meant to illustrate the significance of a specific place, instead, personality is highlighted. Scholars on the subject have not linked whether families would be more likely in middle or upper classes to display these non-distinguishable photographs, and therefore, focus more on family relationships than on an activity or experience.

Overall, previous literature on family photography has touched on many themes: the desire to portray one's family in a positive light, the dichotomy between formal photographs and leisure activities, the occasions where professionals are generally used versus the occasions where amateur photography is common, the emphasis on photography away from the home, and the emphasis on family members as opposed to non-kin in photographs. However, scholars have not sufficiently linked social class to the displaying of family photographs around the home, especially in terms of differences between the middle and upper classes. "The basic assumption underlying this investigation is that family members create, modify, assume, and reinforce group identities through family photographs" (Blinn 1988: 18). In other words, in order to reinforce specific group identities, families must display certain photographs of themselves. Social class might be one of these main group identities that affects the photographs families display. Additionally, scholars have focused on occasions such as travel but have left out how other occasions, such as sports and extra-curricular activities, might affect the photographs middle and upper class families value and display. This

study will contribute to the existing research on family photographs by filling in these gaps.

### *Methods*

In order to gather information about social class and its links to family photography, I conducted interviews as well as performed a content analysis on family photographs. In this case, qualitative methods was more useful than quantitative methods for numerous reasons: I used a combination of interviews and content analysis of family photographs, so the research was grounded in the immediate interpretations or experiences of the family instead of speculations based on quantitative data, like surveys. Also, interviews allowed me access to family photographs displayed around the home where I was able to see first hand the locations and types of photographs families display.

There are no rigid boundaries for determining class. However, I decided to use the education and occupation of the adults in the family to get a general idea of class, but more specifically, I used differences in lifestyle to delineate between the middle and upper classes. Education was the primary indicator used to distinguish middle class participants from lower class families. Education serves to solidify that all families are from middle or upper classes because, “a degree from a four-year college makes even more difference than it once did” in our society (Scott & Leonhardt 2005: 21). Education serves to differentiate between the lower classes and middle classes (Egan 2005) “A man in his fifties with a college degree could expect to earn 81 percent more than a man of the same age with just a high school diploma” (Egan 2005: 107).

More importantly, in order to distinguish between the middle and upper classes, I used cultural and social capital measured by inclusion into exclusive community groups. Bourdieu says cultural capital comes from a child’s upbringing and it determines one’s life chances more than anything else. Social capital is about the relationships and

networks parents are able to provide for their children that help them get ahead and it determines inclusion into exclusive community groups. I used the recognition of a family's status based on others who are already members of this elite group. This distinction is necessary because, as previous research has shown, class distinctions in terms of status markers have become blurred (Class Matters 2005). For instance, "a family squarely in the middle class may own a flat screen television, drive a BMW, and indulge a taste for expensive chocolate" (Steinhauer 2005 135). Despite these status markers, the middle class family will most likely be excluded from the prestigious groups or clubs in society to which upper class families belong (Domhoff 1983). Domhoff states that the upper class has a high degree of class-consciousness and shared values. For example, the Social Register is one of his main indices of the upper class status in that it is very exclusive. Several letters of social acceptability from current members are required to even be considered (Domhoff 1983). A crucial aspect of upper class exclusivity is the cohesiveness of values and social circles. Debutante balls and country clubs are examples of this. Clubs play a large role in delineating the upper class from other members of society. "The club serves to place the adult members of society and their families within the social hierarchy...it offered social and sporting activities ranging from dances, parties, and banquets to golf, swimming, and tennis" (Domhoff 1983: 28). These clubs maintain their exclusiveness not only through initiation fees and annual dues, but through required nominations and recommendation letters. For instance, in Lexington, KY where these interviews took place, there are many "old" families who have social connections and networks that mark these families as part of the exclusive upper class. Many upper class families belong to prestigious country clubs in the area. Not only does a family have to be wealthy enough to pay the exorbitant fee, they also have to have the social connections and networks to be invited to join.

Additionally, only upper class families have children who participate in the debutante ball. “The debutante season is a series of parties, teas, and dances, culminating in one or more grand balls. It announces the arrival of young women of the upper class into adult society with the utmost of formality and elegance” (Domhoff 1983: 32). Most balls cost individually around fifteen to twenty-five thousand dollars, but some can cost more. These clubs and societies serve to keep the upper class isolated from other classes. This too, you must be invited to partake in. These differences in lifestyle served to differentiate between the middle and upper classes in Lexington, KY (See Appendix B).

Four interviews were conducted with middle class families and another four with upper class families to gain insight on the occasions families tend to photograph, how they display these pictures, and the values that are reflected in these photos. These interviews took place in the interviewee’s home at the scheduled time and were approximately twenty-five to thirty minutes in length each. They were semi-structured, so I had a series of topics or main questions but the format was open-ended, which allowed for the interviewees to expand on questions without being guided to a specific answer (See Appendix A). I took notes during the interviews; no tape-recorders were used. These interviews were a convenience sample, so participants were friends and acquaintances from home. Because this is not a random sample and all subjects are from a specific city, the results I find will not be generalizable to all families in upper and middle classes. However, I will look for patterns in my data that shed light onto how families represent themselves differently based on class. I interviewed the parent who is primarily responsible for displaying photographs as well as their eldest child (in every case the age is at least 20), to get different perspectives on family photography from within the family. I will use the information gathered from the children to discuss at the end of my paper how documenting and displaying family photos is beginning to change over time.

The data collected from both the interviews and family photographs displayed in the home were analyzed for pertinent themes. Each interview was typed and coded for patterns and themes after completion. For the content analysis, I organized the content of photographs by themes in terms of occasions: education, sports, community events, and travel. Other themes gleaned from the interviews and the photographs are professional photographs, Christmas cards, the subjects of the photographs, and the children's perceptions of family photographs. From this, I was able to analyze if the middle and upper classes value, and therefore, display different occasions more.

### *Results*

As expected, all families, whether middle or upper class, take and display many family photographs for similar reasons: "to remember the good times together" and to "look back and tell stories." Further, all families displayed the majority of their photographs in rooms in which they spent the most time, such as the family room, living room, or kitchen. The majority of their pictures were displayed in clusters, which correlates with the findings of previous researchers whose results showed that families strive to undermine a sense of loneliness and reinforce belonging and togetherness by displaying their photographs in clusters (Walker 1989, Halle 1991, Rose). Also, across both classes, families placed an emphasis on displaying mainly pictures of their children; very few families displayed pictures of friends. However, the middle class families involved in the study tend to have more displays including friends and relatives. Lastly, across both classes, families had at least one professional photograph of their children displayed, but their means of obtaining these photographs and the content of the photographs differed.

In terms of professional photographs, content proved to be one of the main differences among the middle and upper classes. The professional photographs of middle

class families often portrayed their children engaging in extra-curricular activities, like sports or dance. The upper class professional pictures often resembled formal portraits. In fact, formal portraits appeared in every upper class home, some in the form of photographs, others as charcoal or oil paintings. Further, upper class families displayed these formal portraits in more formal rooms, generally used for entertaining guests, like the dining room or sitting room. Their means of obtaining these photographs differed as well; middle class families generally used a professional only if the opportunity arose through school or other activities, whereas upper class families often sought out professionals.

Another main difference between the middle and upper classes involved the occasions commonly displayed in these respective homes. There was an emphasis on photographs of family travels and vacations in upper class homes, while in middle class homes, travel was important, but the emphasis was more on their children's extra-curricular activities. Upper class families seem to place more of an emphasis on the background or location of their pictures, while middle class families focus on the prop, like a baseball bat, or a dance leotard. Lastly, for both classes, Christmas cards heavily emphasized traveling. Many families chose pictures portraying them on a vacation, either in the States or abroad. Their family's Christmas cards from previous years were also commonly displayed around the home (See Appendix C).

### *Discussion*

The results gathered from the content analysis of family photographs and interviews can be examined in five different themes or groupings: occasions photographed, subjects, professional photographs, Christmas cards, and the children's responses about the future of family photography. Previous research had not examined if the occasions displayed in middle and upper class homes differed at all, but information

on this aspect of family photography would shed light on how families strive to present themselves to the public. In line with previous research suggesting that there is a recent emphasis on leisure activities among families, my results show that families tend to display themselves engaging in leisure activities rather than formal events (Williamson 1994, Hirsch 1981). Not one family mentioned formal events or occasions as being displayed the most. However, the content of their leisure activities differed for the middle and upper class.

Every upper class family heavily emphasized their tendency to display photographs clearly depicting their families on vacation, whether in the United States, or abroad. While three middle class families mentioned travel as an important part of their display, they put their children's extra-curricular activities at the forefront. The upper class families who mentioned these activities only did so after emphasizing travel first. These differences shed light on the lifestyles of the respective classes and the images they strive to project through photographs. Upper class families are not concerned with upward mobility and success because they have already "made it;" instead, they use photographs to show off their lifestyle and demonstrate how they remain a part of this culture. In this way, travel pictures serve as status symbols in that they present the family as being able to afford this luxury. Furthermore, embedded within these travel pictures of the upper class was an emphasis on annual travel spots or traditions. Pamela Gray, an upper class mother, said that they "definitely [display] a lot of travel pictures from annual places we go, like skiing and to the beach and some travel pictures from abroad." Another upper class mother, Becky Carter, had a similar response, "We photograph and display travel the most; especially those pictures from abroad. A lot are from our cottage in Canada. Also, family celebrations or get-togethers are frequently displayed." This further demonstrates upper class families' use of travel photographs as status symbols

because not only can they afford to go on vacation, these vacations occur often and are a recurring part of their lives.

Middle class culture is more focused on upward mobility and future success, so families use photographs of extra-curricular activities to prove that their children are involved in the necessary activities to succeed. This relates back to Lareau's study of the parenting strategies lower and middle class parents adopt. Middle class parents engage in "concerted cultivation," where they push their children to be involved in many activities, such as sports, choir, or dance. They believe that through these activities, their children will learn important skills for the future, like leadership and competition (Lareau 2003). Thus, by documenting and displaying sports or dance through photographs, middle class families are illustrating that their children are on the right path. One middle class mother, Charlotte Hunt, said, "We mostly photograph whatever events the kids are in, so plays, sports, concerts...we are most likely to display the kids' activities and family gatherings around the house." Most middle class families also mentioned displaying photographs of travel as important to them, which shows that travel is a status symbol across both classes. But, there were no photographs displayed in middle class households of their families abroad; they were generally pictures of their families at famous landmarks in the States or at the beach. So, for middle class families, travel is more of a means to demonstrate that they are on their way to success, but not fully there.

The background of the photographs displayed serves to reinforce this dichotomy between travel and activities. Upper class families emphasize backgrounds that detail a specific location or give some sort of information about the picture. This fits in with travel photographs because most of them depict the family in an exotic or new location. An upper class mother, Pamela Gray, said, "I like pictures where there is something special about the background; where the background tells something about the location of

the picture and gives it meaning.” This awareness in choosing photographs with a detailed background relates to Goffman because families are consciously selecting specific types of pictures to present themselves in a certain way. Middle class families also display photographs with detailed backgrounds, for instance, many photographs are taken outside, but the focus is on the people in the picture, not on the place they went. This directly relates to Hirsch’s analysis in that family photographs plain or non-distinguishable backgrounds tend to focus more on relationships between people instead of showing the significance of a place, activity, or experience (Hirsch 1981). Further, many middle class families had photographs with plain backgrounds that emphasized a prop. For instance, photographs of their children with instruments, at dance lessons, or with a baseball bat. In examining the backgrounds of photographs, it is apparent that these different presentations of family life are based on what the respective classes value and deem necessary to present.

Lastly, in terms of the occasions displayed, photographs of education were not displayed often in either middle or upper class homes. Only one middle class family mentioned displaying photographs related to education, though others mentioned pictures of activities that their kids were able to participate in through school. In a few homes, individual school portraits of their children were displayed, especially when they were younger. This lack of educational photographs may have to do with a rising assumption and expectation that children from both classes will complete high school and college. However, when examined closer, school-related events were actually the main routes through which middle class families were able to obtain professional photographs of their children.

Most of the middle class families interviewed said that they would generally only use a professional if the opportunity arose, and this opportunity mainly came from sports

teams or other events at school. Most of the professional photographs from the middle class were of their children's extra-curricular activities, like sports or dance. One family also had a "young achievers" professional layout of each of her children, which displayed them with three different props to showcase their interests. The mother from this family, Charlotte Hunt, said, "Almost all of our professional photographs are school related, so they've mostly been when we had the opportunity." Another middle class mother said that she would only seek out a professional for a special occasion, like a Christmas card. The rest of her professional photographs have been based on opportunity.

While upper class families do not necessarily have more professional photographs, the content and ways these photographs are displayed differs. For instance, all of the upper class homes examined had a formal family portrait, either with the parents, or solely of the kids. These formal portraits were often pictures, but sometimes families had oil paintings or charcoal sketches of their children as well. Formal portraits are different from photographs in that they last throughout time and are generally passed down, generation to generation. In an upper class home, formal portraits of the child's great grandparents, grandparents, and mother were displayed in their formal dining room. Family photographs, on the other hand, represent the "now," or present day, and can easily be changed and switched out (Halle 1991). Because of this dichotomy, it would make sense for the upper class to possess these traditional, long-lasting portraits because they are already at the top in terms of lifestyle and success and want to capture that image. The mother of an upper class family who has a traditional family portrait said, "We use a professional when we want the 'perfect' family photograph. They generally come out nicer and capture our best side. They also look more formal, almost like a painting." This quote shows that families are aware of the image they project through

their photographs, so they are constantly attempting to “capture their best side,” which photographers are able to do.

Cooley can be used to understand the selection process families go through when choosing photographs because he says that people are constantly in conversation with themselves about how they are perceived by others and how others judge or make inferences based on that appearance. Families want to present an idyllic, harmonious family image because they are aware that their photographs will be viewed and judged by guests. Further, formal photographs “permit us to look *at* the family, not *into* it, and present us at best with a few ethical principles about how parents and children ought to look” (Hirsch 1981: 97). Formal portraits are a clear example of this because the focus is on the perfectly posed individuals in the picture, not on a specific location or prop. So, contrary to previous research, it is not so much the professional aspect of the picture that makes it formal, but the content, because many professional pictures, especially for the middle classes, are informal and depict children at sports or dance (Williamson 1994, Hirsch 1981).

Many upper class families also took professional photographs of their travels or vacations to document their leisure activities away from home. “We use a professional for special times or events or for something that we really want to capture nicely. For instance, when we went to Switzerland, we had a professional at the resort photograph us. Also, at Beaver Creek where we go every year, we had a professional take pictures of all the kids together when they were young.” These observations contrast with previous literature on professional photographs in that, for both the middle and upper classes, leisure activities were often professionally photographed (Williamson 1994, Hirsch 1981). As previously examined, for middle class families, professional photographs of sports or dance were displayed, and for upper class families, traveling was captured

professionally. While this contrasts with studies showing that professionals are most often used for formal events, like weddings or graduations, it may further emphasize the increasing value that families are putting on leisure time spent together, which these same studies have also found (Williamson 1994, Hirsch 1981). Especially in photographs of vacations, there is an emphasis on illustrating the strength of family ties. Families want to show that even on vacations away from home, they are still close-knit.

Another interesting finding related to professional photographs was that four families, two middle class and two upper class, said that they sought professionals mainly when their children were younger. “A lot of professional photographs are from when Catherine was younger; we don’t do them as much anymore.” This trend may be because parents want to capture their children’s youth because they are constantly changing. Further, as children grow up, they become active in numerous specialized events, like sports, which are easier to capture through opportunities presented to the team. In other words, one would not need to seek out a professional to capture their children at an activity. The importance seems to shift from the children themselves, to the activity, such as travel or sport, which reinforces the respective lifestyles of the classes.

Another difference between the classes was seen in an examination of the subjects in photographs often displayed around the home. Scholars have noted that photographs on display generally only portray family members; pictures of non-kin, such as friends or colleagues, are lacking (Halle 1991). This observation is linked to my study because in the majority of homes, the emphasis was on children, and occasionally, children with their parents and other kin. Only two families mentioned friends as being displayed around the home, however, friends were displayed in the homes of three middle class families, and two upper class families. The fact that in the interviews, the mothers did not mention friends shows how unimportant they are to the image families strive to present.

Further reducing the importance of friends was the manner in which pictures of friends were displayed; three middle class families displayed photographs of friends on their refrigerators in a collage form. There were so many pictures on the fridge that each picture lost significance, thus placing more emphasis on family members than on friends.

In one middle class home, there was a series of pictures displayed on the wall of the two children with three of their close, neighborhood friends. Halle can be used to examine this because he states that even if friends appear in pictures, they are never the main focus (Halle 1991). In this case, the friends are photographed with the family's two children; they do not appear in the picture alone. Similarly, in an upper class home there was a professional photograph of the children and all of their friends on their annual ski trip to Beaver Creek. However, this photograph was displayed in a cluster of photographs solely featuring family members, thus reducing its importance. Gardner found in her study that middle class families are more likely to display photographs of friends in family albums than lower class families, and this trend may extend to the displaying of photographs around the home as well. The fact that all but one middle class family had photographs of friends on their refrigerators reflects, "key elements of a middle-class lifestyle, such as shared friendship networks and an intense involvement in the lives of their children" (Gardner 1991: 248). For the middle class, this reliance on social networks correlates with Bourdieu's work on social capital; these connections and networks are extremely important for their children in terms of providing opportunities and advantages to be successful (Bourdieu 1987).

The rooms in which photographs are often displayed also shed light onto the image families strive to present to the public. Every family, regardless of class, said that they mainly displayed their family photographs in rooms in which they spent the most time so as to enjoy the photographs often. These rooms include the family room, the

living room, and the kitchen. However, in upper class families, the traditional family portrait is more commonly displayed in a formal room generally used for entertaining guests, while the rest of their leisure photographs are in family oriented rooms. Pamela Gray, an upper class mother, reinforced this observation in her interview: “They are mostly displayed in the family areas, so the rooms we spend the most time in because that way, we are able to enjoy them a lot. The more formal pictures are in the formal rooms, like the dining room and sitting room, which aren’t used on an everyday basis. They are more for show when we have company over. We don’t want to look at them all the time!” This directly relates to Goffman and Cooley in that families present a certain, constructed image of themselves based on social situations. In other words, upper class parents entertain guests in formal rooms, and therefore, display their most formal and idyllic family portraits in those rooms. The fact that Pamela says she doesn’t want to look at her formal family portrait all of the time implies that it was made with a certain audience in mind. These formal portraits were also generally the main focal point of the room. They were not displayed in clusters like the majority of family photographs, something which previous research had not examined.

While selected to present a constructed image and with the public in mind, photographs around the home are also for private enjoyment. Christmas cards, however, are sent out to family and friends with the intention of publicly representing the family, especially the children, each year. Chalfen states that Christmas cards are a way for an audience who would not ordinarily get a glimpse of one’s family life to temporarily become a part of their home mode (Chalfen 1987). Because of this broad audience, Christmas cards seem to closely resemble the photographs previously examined that

come in store-bought frames in that a close bond between the family members is apparent.

However, an interesting trend that appeared in Christmas cards that has yet to be studied was the emphasis numerous families placed on traveling or vacations as the location for their annual cards. “We generally choose pictures from our travels for our yearly cards...they show their personalities well and we are always happy and smiling, generally at the camera.” Further, the two middle class families who do not take annual cards said that they would consider sending them out if they had traveled someplace special. The location seemed just as important to families as their actual appearances in the cards. A middle class mother said, “We don’t take Christmas cards very often...it generally just depends on if we’ve traveled somewhere special. We take pictures on vacations and then might be motivated to send it out during the holidays, like of the Grand Canyon one year.” This reinforces families’ use of travel photographs as status symbols in that travel is not only emphasized around the home, but it is also the focus of the most public form of family photography. Throughout many of the interviews, traveling and vacations cropped up as a main occasion in terms of display. This emphasis on travel may be because it is a way to showcase both financial and cultural capital in that families have to be able to afford these vacations, and experiencing new places and cultures provides children with a more worldly perspective, which gives them advantages for success later in life.

The students interviewed reinforce the common perception that the photographs on display are the ones that best represent their families. All but one of the students interviewed said that they would not change the pictures their parents have chosen to

display around the home. As previous research has discussed, it is the parents' memories and construction of reality that family photographs represent, so based on these pictures, children will form their childhood memories (Williamson 1994, Tinkler 2008). Children are willing to accept these glamorized portrayals of themselves, even if they do not represent reality, because they want to be portrayed in a positive light. An upper class child, Lily Carter, said the photographs on display "reveal good moments in history, we are happy, have nice expressions on our faces, they are normal, natural, and not always posed." The words "normal" and "natural" imply that the standard or norm for family photographs is a portrayal of the idyllic, harmonious family, and students accept their parents' interpretation of reality as long as it meets these standards.

While students value their family photographs, they often take and display photographs of their friends rather than family members. Only one student said that they would display family over friends. For children, as with adults, photographs are identity statements and different presentations of self. So, it would be interesting for future studies to examine this generational difference in the content of photographs displayed, and also how this focus from friends to family changes over time, especially with the start of one's own family.

Another interesting avenue for further research would be how technology is changing the practice of taking and displaying family photographs. Every student interviewed said that they thought traditional family photography was declining with the rise of online albums, internet, and electronic frames. "People are using things like electronic frames and online albums more. They don't print photographs as much anymore; they are sent through email now to be shared with family and friends." With

this in mind, will there be a decline among future generations in displaying family photographs around the home?

### *Conclusion*

This study was based on previous research looking at how families construct reality and create presentations of self through family photographs (Blinn 1988, Halle 1991, Hirsch 1981, Gardner 1991, Reiakvam 1993, Williamson 1994). However, studies had not examined if social class affects the ways families represent themselves through photographs, and more specifically, if the occasions middle and upper class families display differ. While the sample size of this study was small, patterns among the classes were found that could be expanded upon in future studies with a larger sample size. In line with previous research on this topic, leisure activities with family members are heavily emphasized in both middle and upper class families. However, the activities themselves differ according to class: the upper class families in the study displayed both travel photographs and their children's extra curricular activities, but with an emphasis on travel, while middle class families largely displayed their children's activities with a minimum of travel related pictures. In the upper class, the emphasis on travel was reinforced through Christmas cards and professional photographs, while in the middle class, travel was reinforced through Christmas cards if opportunities for vacations arose, and was not an activity in professional photographs at all. These results reflect the different values and lifestyles of the middle and upper classes. Middle class families strive to display photographs of their children engaged in numerous activities to show that they are gaining the necessary skills for future success, and upper class families portray photographs of travel and vacations because they are already at the top, and

therefore, want to capture their present, luxurious lifestyle. In addition to suggestions for future research regarding the changing practice of family photographs, with a larger sample size, future research could also include the lower class in a similar study to see if their family photographs differ in occasion, content, or style. Another interesting factor that might be researched is gender in terms of who often takes and displays family photographs. Further research is necessary because visual analysis through family photographs on display around the home is a viable way to study the constructed presentations of family life.

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*Appendix A: Interview Schedule*

**Parent:**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - What do you like to do in your free time with your family?
  - What is your occupation and the occupation of your spouse?
  - What is your educational background and the educational background of your spouse?
2. Do you take family photographs often? Why or why not?
  - Who generally takes these family photos?
  - Who is normally in the pictures that you display around the house? (kids, parents, relatives, friends)
  - What occasions do you generally photograph? Which occasion would you say you photograph most? (education, travel, community events, sports, rituals)
3. Are any of your photographs taken by professionals?
  - How do you decide when to use a professional or just take the photo yourself?
  - Do you prefer candid photos or posed?
  - What is your criteria for the pictures you pick?
4. How do you choose which photos go on display around the house?
  - What rooms are they mostly displayed in and why?
5. Which picture do you think represents your family the best and why?
6. Can you show me a holiday card? Why did you choose that picture?

**Child (20 or older):**

1. Do you ever initiate the taking of family photographs?
  - Who do you normally take pictures with? (family, friends, relatives)
2. Why do you think your parents chose the photographs on display?
  - What do you think they say about your family?
  - Which photograph do you think best represents your family and why? (just think of one and describe it to me)
3. If you were the one who put family photos on display, would they be different? Why or why not?
4. Do you think the practice of taking and displaying family photographs is changing at all?
  - When you are older and have a family, do you think you will display family photographs throughout the house?

5. What occasions are displayed around your house the most? (travel, sports, special interests, education, etc)

*Appendix B: Participants' Education and Occupation*

	<b>Becky Carter</b>	<b>Barbara Crawford</b>	<b>Pamela Gray</b>	<b>Lynn Britt</b>	<b>Kelly Styles</b>	<b>Camille Brent</b>	<b>Charlotte Hunt</b>	<b>Megan Thompson</b>
<b>Education</b>	<b>Wife: MD Husband: Law Degree</b>	<b>Wife: BA Husband: BA</b>	<b>Wife: BA Husband: MA</b>	<b>Wife: BA Husban :MD</b>	<b>Wife: MA Husband PhD</b>	<b>Wife: MA Husband:</b>	<b>Wife: Law degree Husband:</b>	<b>Wife: BA Divorced</b>
<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Wife: Retired doctor  Husband: Lawyer</b>	<b>Horse Farm Owners/ Managers</b>	<b>Wife: Homemake  Husband: VP Financial Consultant</b>	<b>Wife: Home- maker Husban Surgeon</b>	<b>Wife: Dean of Middle School  Husband French Professor</b>	<b>Wife: English Teacher  Husband: Assistant Commissione r of Athletic Association</b>	<b>Wife: Homemaker  Husband: Professor</b>	<b>Wife: Accountant</b>
<b>Debutante Participant</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Member of Country Club</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>