‘Everyone’s cuddled up and it just looks really nice’: an emotional geography of some mums and their family photos

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This paper is based on a small-scale, qualitative research project, which used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore what a particular group of middle-class, white mothers with young children were doing with their family photographs. It was evident from the interviews that this group of women felt ambivalent about their photos. On the one hand, photos were seen as precious objects which evoked intense emotional reaction; on the other, they were seen as banal and trivial. The paper explores this emotional paradox, and suggests that it is part of the spatial proximity so central to these family snaps, which the mothers described as ‘togetherness’. This togetherness was also enacted corporeally, in a number of ways in relation to the photos. The paper therefore also argues, more generally, that studies of visual imagery need to pay more careful attention to how particular images are engaged with in specific, diverse and multi-sensory ways when they are ‘seen’.

Key words: photographs, family, togetherness, visuality, mothering.

Introduction

The Refugee Council in Britain has recently been distributing a leaflet appealing for funds. Its front and back pages are the same: next to a picture of a clock face, the text asks, ‘In just a few minutes soldiers will break down your door. They’ve already killed your father and raped your daughter. Now they are coming for you. What should you take? Quick. Think. Money? Your passport? A family photo? You have two minutes left to decide’.

A family photo? Do we imagine that a family photograph is as vital to the survival of a refugee as money and a passport? The Refugee Council clearly thinks we do. And on the basis of a small-scale qualitative project I have undertaken talking with a group of women about their family photos, the Council is correct in its assumption. Family photos—photos taken by family members, of family members, for viewing mostly by family members—are indeed extraordinarily important, emotionally resonant objects. They are also seen, by that same group of women, as trite and banal. That is, these women feel that their photographs are at once intensely charged and embarrassingly trivial. This paper explores this emotional paradox, and its geography. In so doing, the paper does not take as its focus specific emotions (although I do mention some of them: embarrassment, love, happiness, for example). Rather, I am...
interested in what I see as some of the qualities of the emotional as a specific modality of experience. These qualities are about the complexity and unpredictability of emotions: their ambivalence and capriciousness, the way they can erupt unexpectedly, sometimes with surprising force, their efficacy, the way they can surprise and disrupt (as well as reinforce) what we think we know. And as I will go on to argue, thinking about the emotional in this kind of way implies thinking about the geographies produced by that emotionality as similarly complicated, eruptive and ambivalent.

The emotional ambivalence expressed by my interviewees in relation to their family snaps is in fact reflected by the academic literature on family photography; interestingly, though, that reflection takes the form of a division in that literature between those critics that pay attention to the triviality of family snaps, and those that prefer to emphasize the intensity of emotions that they can evoke (see also Holland 1997: 142). On the one hand, there are a number of studies that stress the banality of family photographs, and do so by emphasizing their seemingly endless repetition of a very limited range of subject matter. Family photos almost always show only happy family members at leisure (the acceptable exception, as Spence 1986 noted, is a snap or two of a screaming baby). Two large-scale content analyses of family photo albums that prove this limited range conclude therefore that the subject matter of family snaps is ‘astonishingly narrow’ (Halle 1993: 104; also Chalfen 1987); and hence Stewart’s (1984: 49) claim that ‘all family albums are alike’. Chalfen’s verdict (1987: 142) is that they have an ‘overwhelming sense of similarity and redundancy’ and Evans (2000: 112) comments that it is in family photography that ‘the most stultified and stereotyped repertoire of composition, subject-matter and style resides’. None of these studies pay much attention to how albums are looked at by individuals, although Slater (1995: 141) hypothesizes that ‘at most, we look at photographs as a kind of one-off reliving of a recent leisure experience’ and that while ‘emotional investment in these images maybe intense [it] is generally short—they gradually become invisible’ (1995: 146). To the extent that the audiencing of these photos is given any attention, then, it seems to be assumed that trivial images do not invite sustained or intense viewing once their initial impact has worn off.

On the other hand, however, there is also a significant body of work on family photos that offers highly emotionally charged readings of particular photographs. I am thinking here of a number of essays by British feminists, often working in a more or less tightly theorized psychoanalytic framework, which focus on a childhood photograph of the author, often taken by their father. These photographs are revisited, years after their making, by their subject, now a critic interested in the construction of (their own) classed and gendered subjectivities (see e.g. Kuhn 1995; Spence 1986; Walkerdine 1991). The results are intensely emotional, for both author and reader. Walkerdine (1991: 149–156), for example, in an essay entitled ‘Behind the painted smile’, writes about an apparently sweet photo of herself dressed as the Bluebell Fairy when she was three years old. As the title suggests, she tries to strip away the superficial prettiness of this image in order to address ‘the negative emotions covered over by all this sugar and spice’ (1991: 147), and in particular ‘a terrible rage’ (1991: 152). Her essay works with what she calls ‘traces’ in the photograph, traces of that rage, and in so doing she challenges those other accounts that emphasize the banality and invisibility of family photos.

These two accounts of family photography—one emphasizing its triviality and the
superficiality of relations with it, the other emphasizing its ability to produce intense emotional reactions—have very different theoretical starting points. Yet, as I have noted, it seems necessary to think about the triviality and the intensity of relations to family photos, since my interview material suggests that both are at work in the viewing of family photos. And indeed, one critic at least acknowledges the ambivalence of reactions towards family photos. Sedgwick (2000: 342), in her account of bringing some photos of herself as a child to her therapist, notes the mix of 'pride and peevishness' behind her choice of pictures: pride in the 'unbroken circle of the handsome, provincial Jewish family' shown in the snaps and peevishness because the photos also hold the possibility of carrying 'grown-up, full-throated grievances' that therapy might bring to consciousness (see also Spence and Holland 1991).

This paper argues that one way of pulling the intensity and the banality of photographs into some kind of relation is to pay more attention to how photographs are seen. The literature on family photography is part of a much wider interest in what is being called 'visual culture' across a range of academic disciplines (see e.g. Evans and Hall 1999; Mirzoeff 1999; Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Walker and Chaplin 1997). While this rich body of work has produced fascinating interpretations of the meaning of many kinds of visual imagery, there are surprisingly few studies that explore the ways in which particular kinds of visual images are seen by particular audiences in particular places. While Mirzoeff’s (1999: 1) claim that 'modern life takes place onscreen' is obviously overblown, there are in fact remarkably few explorations of just how images of various kinds are indeed encountered in modern, everyday life. Instead, critics of visual culture offer ‘readings’ of the ‘effect’ of specific images without ever actually investigating the precise ways in which an audience other than themselves might in fact be effected, or affected, by the imagery in question.

Moreover, I do not think that exploring how images are ‘seen’ necessarily or exclusively means investigating how they are ‘interpreted’ or ‘understood’. A few studies addressing visual culture do indeed examine how images are made sense of by particular spectators by referring to reviews, commentaries and criticism of various visual objects (see e.g. Nead 1988 on nineteenth-century art exhibitions and Fyfe and Ross 1996 on a contemporary museum). Yet images are encountered through a number of registers that far exceed the discursive: the bodily, the sensory, the psychic and the emotional. Clearly, these are shorthand terms, but I deploy them to indicate that in this paper, I am trying to use ‘seen’ rather more literally, and corporeally. I am interested in how particular spectators, as embodied subjects, experience their viewing through a range of sensory and affective registers (see also Bruno 2002; Jacobs 1981). To draw on Crouch (2001), what is the feeling of doing family photos?

In its focus on ‘doing’, my argument clearly sits within ‘the performative turn’ in the social sciences (see Nash 2000 for a review). Much of the literature on family photography can be read as arguing that the taking and displaying of family photos performs and thus reproduces certain social formations—the heterosexual, pre-eminently—and its family classed, gendered and racialized subject position. But, as I have already noted, the ordinary, everyday practices through which this reproduction takes place (or indeed fails to happen) is almost entirely neglected. The more sociological literature pays little attention to what is done with family snaps, dismissing them as trivial and unimportant; and while the feminist psychoanalytic literature has theorized particular moments of
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therapeutic and analytical viewing in great detail, its overriding concern with the relation between a particular image and a particular subjectivity means that it has little to say about the quotidian practice of viewing photographs. Although this feminist literature takes representations of the body as a central concern, it is much less interested in the embodied practices, and practicalities, of family photographs: the posing, the snapping, getting the film developed, the sorting, storing, displaying, redisplaying, dusting and looking. I will argue instead that the everyday effects of family photography cannot be appreciated unless all that doing of things with photos is understood as part of how they are seen.

My arguments here for the importance of the doing of visual imagery are built on interviews with fourteen women, in their own homes, in two towns in the south-east of England. All these women lived with their husband and young children; in all but four cases their children were too young to go to school. All the mothers had worked outside the home before having children and nine had not returned to paid work when I interviewed them, while the other five worked part-time. They were all white and, in my estimation of both their income levels and lifestyle, comfortably middle class. I recruited all but one by ‘snowballing’ through friendship networks (the exception, Claire, I saw photographing her boys in a local playground one day and approached her directly). I recorded our interviews, and then interpreted the transcriptions of the interviews based on the method of discourse analysis outlined by Tonkiss (1998).1 My argument here is therefore based on a series of in-depth conversations with middle-class mums with young kids and not in full-time paid work, and more comparative work is necessary before the (ir)relevance of the details of my argument for other people in different situations—refugees, for example—can be assessed.

My initial decision to recruit only women for this project was in fact based on a research question I never managed to answer: what happened to how family photography was done when digital cameras and home computers took over from traditional cameras and family albums. There is quantitative evidence to suggest that adult men and children dominate home computer use (Anderson et al. 1999), and I had anecdotal evidence that women did most of the family photography work. If this was indeed the case, what then happens when family photos go digital? Would women use computers to do their photography work? Would men start to do it instead? These are questions I cannot answer, since only one of the women I interviewed showed the slightest interest in digital cameras.2 But in fact, talking to women about what they did with photos turned out to be central to this research, as I will elaborate below, because their work with family snaps was a crucial part for them of being a particular sort of woman: a mother.3

When I visited these women, then, I wanted to try to explore a more phenomenological and material approach to seeing. Our conversations explored who took photos in their household, when and why, and what was done with the photos once they were developed. I was taken around every house to see photos on display, and in all but three cases I was shown many albums of photos as well, and sometimes boxes too. I asked how these mums stored, framed and placed their photos. How did they see their photographs through these kinds of practices, I wondered? With what emotions, and what meanings? Through what kind of visuality? With what kinds of gestures? Through what kinds of voices and silences? And what kinds of spaces were (re)produced in that interaction? I have suggested elsewhere that one kind of space produced when this group of women
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look at their family photos was a peculiarly integrated domestic space (Rose 2003). Here, I focus on another spatiality: that of togetherness.

'Togetherness' is absolutely central to how this group of women interact with their photos. In unpacking how it is done and how it feels, I will argue that it must be understood in terms of that embodied sense of seeing I have just been outlining. I will also argue that its particular dynamic is part of that emotional paradox with which I opened this paper. 'Togetherness', as performed by these women and their photos, is experienced in an emotional register that is both intense and banal, and its spatiality is similarly ambivalent. Finally, I will also suggest that this particular kind of emotional geography has everything to do with the fact that its performers were mothers and photographs of their children.

Feeling family photographs intensely

The importance of family photos to the women I talked with was evident in a number of ways. Firstly, all felt compelled to take photographs of their children, especially when those children were very young (Titus 1976). The mums told me about the many, many photos they had taken of their kids when they were newborn: 'tons and tons', 'every time Cameron moved he got to have a photograph', 'we've got pictures of Jenny breathing, sort of, smiling, breathing, eating', 'you know, everything he did—and they don't do anything!—I went, "Take a photograph, take a photograph," so we've got like loads'. As their babies grew, all these mums agreed with Tina when she said, 'you just have to make a conscious effort to keep snapping away I think'. I was shown albums and albums and boxes and boxes of photographs, and photos were on display everywhere in their houses, even in the toilets; they were 'dotted about', 'all round' and 'anywhere'. And despite the enormous numbers of photos generated by this desire to photograph 'everything', only one of these women had ever thrown away any photographs of their own children. Indeed, when I asked these mums if they ever had thrown photos away, the question was greeted with horror: 'I can't', 'Never', 'I couldn't bear to'.

Secondly, these women felt obliged to do a lot with their photographs. Despite all the hard work and tiredness caused by looking after young children, all the mums I spoke with made the time to date, sort, store, display and circulate their photographs. It went without saying that the film should be developed. The very least that should be done after that, they felt, was that the photos should be dated, if the camera did not do it for them. They described themselves as 'good' if they did this; as Emma M said, 'I was so good and labelled the fronts of the, of the erm wallet, you know sort of Bonny first week, or Bonny first month'. Dating photographs might be seen as a part of 'good enough' mothering, in fact. Most photographs were then put into some kind of storage, but some were chosen for display after much thought about which photo should go in which frame where. Every mother except one I spoke to was also either making a photo album or planning time in the future to make one; going through photos and putting an album together was seen as time-consuming and therefore difficult, but also as necessary and pleasurable. And they all also sent many photographs of their children to certain relatives (especially mothers and mothers-in-law) and, much less often, to friends.

Thirdly, they all insisted that they looked at their photos often. They told me of pausing to look while they dusted photograph frames, when they pulled curtains to at night, when
they were just coming up and down the stairs (the stairway wall is a very popular location for displaying framed photos), and when they added new photos to an album. ‘I love this album and I really love showing it to people’, said Emma M, ‘it’s been a real pleasure looking at it again tonight.’ The intensity of this looking was indicated by Claire, when she paused while she was showing me one of the flip albums she used to store her photos, and then said, ‘this is amazing, I haven’t looked at these for a long time’, and paused again to take them in. Instead of pausing, Sharon punctuated her description of looking at photographs of her boy when he was a baby with an exclamation:

When you sort of look back—and they do sort of change and you don’t notice it. But when you see it like that [gestures to a photo] you know, it’s sort of, you go ‘Oh God,’ you know, and if I had another [photo] there now, he’d just look really different again.

Claire, and all my other interviewees, affirmed the importance of their children changing and growing to the intense reactions family snaps can evoke:

Well, you sort of look at your children and they grow so quickly and it’s, and, and I struggle to remember everything and then I look at it, and it’s sort of, oh it’s, yes [pause], it’s, you know time moves on so quickly and they’re growing and they’re changing and it makes me feel a little bit sad that it’s gone.

Claire’s pause here is significant. Like Sharon’s exclamation of ‘Oh God’, it marks the intensity of her reaction to these pictures, an intensity which the words that follow, ‘a little bit sad’, don’t capture. But it is difficult to say exactly what emotion that loaded pause is evoking. Like Sharon’s exclamation, it is empty of substantial emotional content. So far in this paper I too have avoided labelling the emotional charge of family snaps, and I have explained that refusal by pointing to my interest in exploring the complexity of emotionality rather than in cataloguing a range of emotions. Towards the end of the paper, however, I will offer another reason for that refusal. But first let me turn to this group of women’s other response to their photographs that I have mentioned, when they feel the photos to be banal.

The banality of family photographs

Family photos, then, no matter how old, are important, emotionally resonant images for these women. Yet they also, in the interviews, repeatedly trivialized the photographs and their own relation to them. Photos were not always treated as particularly precious objects in and of themselves, for example: I was told of photos ‘shoved’, ‘bunged’ and ‘whammed’ into storage boxes or albums. The practice of taking photographs was also trivialized. All the mums were laughing when we talked about just how many photographs we had taken of our babies. We were laughing at ourselves for our desire to photograph repeatedly babies who, as Fiona said, are not doing anything—ending up with hundreds of photos showing more or less the same thing. But if the sheer numbers of photos were funny they were also a bit embarrassing when someone else was looking at them all. There were even suggestions that such a compulsion to photograph was a kind of pathology: Sam described herself as going ‘mad’ when she took lots of photos on a recent trip with her 2-year-old daughter to Australia to see her brother, while Tina said she was ‘getting better’ now her kids were older and she was taking fewer photos of them. While most of these women wanted to show me their albums and framed photographs, they also all urged me not to feel I had to look carefully at every
single photo. Partly this was because they knew I did not know the people pictured—and as I will argue below, knowing the people pictured is vital to the togetherness generated by viewing family photos. But it was also due to the sheer numbers of photographs they had. Emma F, for example, said she used ‘any excuse’ to show her wedding album to visitors, but:

‘You don’t like to bore people, do you. ‘Would you like to see my wedding album, it’ll take an hour’! That’s when I say, please flick through fast. Because they’re very samey.

Emma’s comment leads to the second kind of embarrassment with family snaps, and that is the predictability of what the photos showed. All the women were well aware, it seemed, that their photos might be seen as trite and banal because they knew that other collections of family photos contained photos of exactly the same kind. Baby albums were felt to be especially generic, especially in the photos of ‘firsts’: hospital visitors, first time home, first outing, first smile, first solid food, first tooth, first steps, first pair of shoes, first birthday party (when the album usually ends), ‘all the usuals’. Although I was never told to flick quickly through these particular albums—baby albums, for most of my interviewees, were especially resonant—nonetheless the mum showing me her collection of baby photos would make it clear she knew that it was hardly unique in its subject matter. ‘You must have seen loads along the same lines’, Jane W said, and Jane M listed the conventional pictures in a sing-song voice as she showed them to me, to indicate her awareness of their banality. Jeanette laughingly described herself as ‘sad’ for the predictability of the baby album she had made.

As well as evoking reactions intense enough to halt speech, then, family photos also evoke another range of reactions which emphasizes how ‘naïf’ it all is: there are just too many photos and they are way too predictable.6

**Togetherness and family photographs**

When I asked my interviewees what their favourite photographs showed, ‘togetherness’ was the word that was used. Togetherness is about spatial proximity, at least in part. But what kind of proximity is important to family snaps? And how might the spatiality of togetherness help us to understand this apparent contradiction between a fierce attachment to photos and an embarrassment at what feels like their excessive proliferation and repetitiveness?

The literature on family snaps pays attention to ‘togetherness’ in terms of what family photographs show. As has been demonstrated (Chalfen 1987; Halle 1993), family photos are rarely of individuals on their own (although my impression is that this is less true of snaps of babies and toddlers than it is of older children and adults). Snaps instead tend to show at least two family members. Drawing on work that understands ‘togetherness’ as a key aspect of family and domestic life in Western culture (see e.g. Hunt 1989; Pennartz 1999; Madigan and Munro 1999), it has been argued that the spatial proximity of family members in family snaps symbolizes and reiterates the integration of the family unit (see especially Bourdieu et al. 1990).

It is certainly the case that togetherness in the content of family snaps was very important to the mothers I interviewed. Many of the albums I was shown contained a series of photos of a new baby with their every visitor—‘every relation wants their photograph taken you know with with the new baby you know’—and several mums took a photo every time their child saw his or her grandparents.
And pictures of family members close together were often particularly important to the mums I talked with. 'I like it cos we're just all together', said Sharon, 'it's really nice, I just like the way everybody's sort of cuddled up and it's just really nice.' Talking about a framed photograph on a bookcase in her living room, Karen explained why it was there:

You know I suppose like lots of families you do get, you do get together more often than just more often than just weddings and funerals and Christenings or whatever. But you don't have your photograph taken together. And that was just a photograph together.

I now want to argue that togetherness is not only done by looking at what a photograph shows, however. Togetherness is also done by how photographs are displayed and how they are audienced (Fiske 1994).

So, for example, the objects surrounding a photograph can also establish family connections (Batchen 2000). A writing bureau, for example, in Tina's case:

There's one of my grandparents there, my my erm grandmother died a couple of years back, and they actually left me, the the piece of furniture, that's why that will probably always stay on there.

But most often, the objects surrounding a photograph that indicate familial togetherness are other photographs. About two-thirds of my interviewees had whole walls devoted to family photos, which often included photos of their parents and even grandparents, their husband's family, themselves when much younger, as well as pictures of their own children. Collages and multiframes were popular too. These displays were also seen as expressing togetherness. Some mums were annoyed at displays of photos that did not contain images of certain family members; thus Linda disliked a collage of photos her mother-in-law had put together because the only picture of her family was of herself, with her husband on their wedding day. All members of a family need to be shown together through these multiple displays. Crowded together in groups, photos as objects again register 'togetherness' as a central quality.

Moreover, the audiencing of family photographs is also central to the togetherness that they articulate. This audience can be immediate family. All the mums told me that they often looked at family photos with their children, and Claire said, 'When the weather's bad or just moments when we haven't got anything to do, I'll get the albums out, my husband enjoys looking at them, and the children do, so that's when I feel it's of benefit'. Mums with younger children often remarked with surprise at how much their babies and toddlers loved looking at family photos, and all the mothers I interviewed who had pre-school children used photos as a means of teaching their children who was who in the family. Like Karen, all were delighted when their young children could tell them the names of the people pictured: 'because usually he he points people out, which is great'. For mums with older children, photos were looked at together for fun, to fill a rainy afternoon, for school projects.

Togetherness appears too in the mothers' awareness that it is not only their gaze and that of their husband and children that will be brought to bear on these displayed photos, however. The viewing of family snaps was understood by these women as a process also embedded in the context of wider family relations. These mothers were sensitive to the gazes of other family members. Many of them talked about how family visiting their house would look at photos, and a duty to signal family togetherness to this wider family through the appropriate display of photographs was keenly felt. As Claire said:
Well, my mum's up there, my sister, my brother, my father's not there, my er my husband's parents are up there, so the majority of people are there, so I have tried to cover that, cos they do look and, 'Where am I?', [laughing] so I must get my dad up there.

Indeed, three of the mums had been given photographs of their husband's parents' wedding to put in a frame after their mother-in-law had visited and seen only a photo of the mum's parents' wedding on display.

What is evident to me from these conversations is that the togetherness articulated through family photos is experienced through bodily proximity. This is certainly the case in terms of what photographs show, and it is also the case in terms of how they are seen. They are looked at with others, or with others in mind, as I have demonstrated. Togetherness is thus constituted by the way their viewing is done, as well as what they show, as individual images and in groups. But I also want to insist that this togetherness of bodily proximity includes those people pictured. This togetherness is made by seen and seeing bodies in interrelation, because all my interviewees treated their photographs as if they were part of the people pictured.

That family photos carry a material trace of the person photographed was taken absolutely for granted in my interviews. Take, for example, the question every mother I spoke with her child frequently: 'who's that in the photo?' That question—'who is it?', not 'who is shown by it?'—assumes that a photo is a person. Almost every interviewee, at some point in our interview, spoke of a particular photograph as if it was the person it showed. Diane talked to me about a framed picture of her mother that stands on the television in their living room, for example, and said, 'Yeah I like her there. Er she'll stay in the lounge [laughing]'. This sense that photographs are a material extension of bodies that are, very often, distant or changed, is central to how photographs are seen—and explains the horrified reaction when I asked these mums about throwing away photographs of their children. Throwing away a photograph would be like throwing away (part of) the child, as Sharon said explicitly.

If photographs in some sense carry the presence of the person they show, then the feeling of doing togetherness when they are looked at becomes quite tangible. For photographs are, literally, felt when they are auditioned. This was something I noticed repeatedly in the interviews. As my interviewees showed me their photographs, they picked up photo frames and gave them to me, they turned the pages of albums and stroked particular photos, they took photos out of protective covers and mounts to see them better and, I think, just to hold them. There is a tactility to looking at family photos which is also about enacting a corporeal closeness between the viewer and the person pictured. This suggests that, as with so many kinds of visuality, looking at photographs is not only visual.

Corporeal togetherness and emotional paradox

The notion that photographs carry a trace of the person they pictured is central to Roland Barthes's (2000) book about photography, Camera Lucida. Barthes is concerned to understand the particularity of photographs as a specific kind of visual image, and he locates its specificity in the kind of viewing it produces. Most famously, Barthes argued that a photograph, unlike any other type of image, could contain what he called a punctum. While all photographs—like all kinds of images—partici-
participate in systems and structures of cultural meaning, photographs, uniquely suggests Barthes, can also carry a certain kind of interruption to meaning, and this interruption is the punctum. Barthes is explicit that not all photos have puncta, and also that puncta are specific to particular viewers: not everyone will see the same punctum. But when a punctum happens, it punctures the cultural codes through which a photograph signifies; Barthes (2000: 51) says that while ‘the studium is ultimately always coded, the punctum is not’. This puncture is felt intensely by the spectator: ‘a photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)’ (Barthes 2000: 27). And one of the causes of a punctum is an encounter with the real corporeality a photo carries.

In Cameră Lucida, Barthes brings together his semiological concern for systems of meaning with a psychoanalytic concern for a real beyond cultural signification; Barthes’s discussion of the punctum evokes Lacan’s notion of the Real. In some ways, then, Barthes is bringing together the two theoretical traditions outlined at the beginning of this paper. On the one hand, there are those, often sociologists, who look at the structures and patterns of meaning conveyed in family photos and conclude that they do little more than reiterate a specific form of familial ideology; and on the other hand, there are those, often inspired by psychoanalysis, who have looked at the psychic dynamics at work in particular images and emphasized much more the intense emotional charge they can carry in their formation of subjectivities. Barthes pulls these two together by combining a concern for meaning and the studium of photographs with an appreciation of what is beyond meaning: the punctum. And he does so by paying very careful attention in his book to the act of looking.

Bal and Bryson (1991: 184) argue strongly that semiology ‘is centrally concerned with reception’. Barthes is, of course, usually characterized as one of the founders of semiological analysis, and his book on photography amply bears out Bal and Bryson’s claim. It is centrally concerned with what it feels like to look at photographs (and to be photographed). Indeed, he begins the book by referring to Bourdieu et al.’s (1990) work on amateur and family photography and saying that he felt he wanted to ‘dismiss such sociological commentary; looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture’, and in those certain photographs he ‘saw only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body’ (Barthes 2000: 7, my emphasis). Camera Lucida is structured by Barthes’s search after his mother’s death for a photograph which reminds him of her as she was, and he tells his reader that he found the photo that did that when he was sitting in her apartment one November evening, alone, ‘under the lamp’, picking up photograph after photograph (Barthes 2000: 63-72). He takes several pages to describe, as he says, inadequately, the impact of the photo on him and his reaction to it, and his study repeatedly notes the specificities of particular moments of looking at photographs. Both the studium and the punctum are ways of seeing photographs.

I have already commented that in the interviews that constitute this project, I too was concerned with the dynamics of particular moments of spectating. And Barthes’s account of looking at photographs is very helpful in making sense of the emotional ambivalence shown by my interviewees towards their photographs. For I would argue that their acute awareness of the cultural codes which patterned their frames and albums and photographs—their awareness of the studium which governs family photography—produces their sense of the banality of photographs. Photographs can be ‘just flicked
through' or 'bunged into albums' or seen as 'naff' by these mums because they know that their photography work is in no sense unique; they are following the rules of a well-established genre.

However, the intensity with which these mothers also experienced looking at their photographs suggests moments of corporealized punctal interruption to that predictability. I saw and heard the arrows of puncta fly in my interviews repeatedly, and I have already mentioned two: Claire’s pause while looking at photographs of her boys eating cakes, and Sharon’s exclamation at how her boy was changing. Another would be the repeated ‘so’s that pepper descriptions of (photos of) newborn babies: ‘she’s so grey’, ‘she was so tiny’, ‘he was so scrunched up and red’, ‘her skin is just so perfect’, ‘he was just so beautiful’. The intensity carried by the ‘so’ in these descriptions of photos are gestures indicating a punctal spectating at the limits of meaning, I think. I have also noted that I did not want to label the emotional content of these moments, and I hope now that the reason is evident: if these are indeed puncta, they are beyond the codes with which we name emotions. A punctum is outside the range of interview talk. The limited grasp that language has to express punctal moments also accounts for the limited explanations the mums I talked with gave me for why certain photographs were their favourites. In each interview I asked them to show me a favourite photograph, and I asked why it was a favourite. The quotation in the title of this paper—‘it just looks really nice’—is typical of the answers I received. ‘It’s nice’, ‘I just like it’, ‘it grabbed my eye’, ‘they’re nice pictures’. The thinness of these explanations is not an indication of these women’s banality, but of the difficulty of articulating the pull of something excessive to codes of culture.

I should be clear here that I am not suggesting that only the punctal moments of spectatorship were emotional, however. Clearly, the punctum of a photograph can indeed evoke some very intense emotions; but then so too can the studium, as the anger with which the banality of family photographs have been attacked by feminist critics in particular attests. And the punctum may also be experienced in more muted ways, too, in ways that perhaps my dependence on interview material would find hard to detect. Nor, then, should the emotional be equated with the inexpressible; some feelings may be hard to express, but others are not. What is also important to remember when working with Barthes’s account of photography, however, is the specificity of the punctum and his concern to ground the effect of a photograph in a particular moment of viewing. My interviewing strategy, while perhaps not ideal for detecting all puncta, was effective in enabling me to describe what some women did with their photographs. It enabled me to witness that doing and thus to come to a rather different understanding of the effects of family photography from those critics uninterested in that doing. Certainly, family photography carries powerfully conservative visions of familiality and identities, but it does other things too, and if we want to grasp some of those things, including the emotional geographies that are produced when mothers encounter photos of their own children, we need to engage with acts of seeing more carefully, more closely.

Spatial proximity, family photographs—and mothering

I have argued, then, that looking at family photographs, for this particular group of women, entails a paradoxical emotional state, because they feel both that their photos are extraordinarily precious and that they are silly
and banal. I have argued that this paradox can be understood by drawing on Barthes’s account of seeing photography, and particularly his notions of the *studium* and the *punctum*. The banality of looking at family photographs enacts their *studium*, while those moments of pause or shock or repetition are punctal. As I have noted, bodily proximity is central to both ways of seeing. I have suggested that the groupings of those photographed, the photographs themselves and those looking at photographs are all structured by a discourse of ‘togetherness’ that is central to Western familial ideology. Precisely because photographs carry a trace of the bodies they picture, they are a very powerful means for doing togetherness, even when—indeed, especially when (Sontag 1978)—families are scattered. But that trace of corporeality is also shocking, says Barthes; it is an encounter with a real beyond culture. Hence my claim that togetherness, in the form of bodily proximity, is one of the emotional geographies of family photographs.

What I would like to reflect on a little more tentatively at this point is relevance of mothering to my argument. I have already noted that I chose to interview women for this project because I wanted to explore what was happening to family photography when a household started using a digital camera. As I also noted, I was not able to pursue that line of enquiry. What did strike me immediately from the interviews, however, was the huge amount of time and energy these busy and tired women put into their family snaps. Why were these mothers so committed to all this photography work? What, to put it crudely, was in it for them?

Well, some of that work is enforced by those norms of familial ideology, of course. As I have noted, there are certain expectations about family photography that are held not only by these mums but also by their wider family, about what photos should be on display, for example (there is also a clear etiquette about which family members should be sent what sorts of photos and how often). But I do not think this can fully account for the commitment these mothers had to their photographs. Instead, I started to think about the relationship between a mother and her child—or at least, between a white middle-class mother and her own, able-bodied child. Is there something about this sort of mothering in particular that invites or demands a close relationship to photographs? For it slowly became apparent to me that, although so many of the photos I was shown were of children, the active subject in relation to the photo was the mother (see also Gallop 1999; Hirsch 1997; Leonard 1999).

I have argued that photos carry a part of the person they picture, and in that sense they—the photo and the person—are real, beyond representation. They simply are. But that very quality of the image also meant that in the interview, the children in the photos were not produced as the active subjects of photography. They were just there, real, ‘natural’, their ‘essence’ captured (to use another frequent description of what kinds of photos these mothers liked best). Although the children were corporealized very powerfully in the photos, in our interview their embodiment and subjectivity was interpreted entirely by their mother. There was no discussion, for example, of whether a child might be posing even when they looked ‘natural’, for example. Photographs, then, seem to be very much about mothering.

In her recent essay on mothering, Hollway (2002) works towards specifying mothering as a particular kind of (partly unconscious) intersubjectivity. In brief, she argues that mothering is the relationship between the mother and her child. (This may seem obvious, but much of the feminist literature on mothering positions the mother and the child as two autonomous subjects whose needs are in conflict.) She explores
the particular difficulty of that relationship for mothers when their children are very young. As she says, ‘there is a period in children’s lives … when their ruthlessly narcissistic demands place terrible strain on mothers, since, in this relationship, they [the mother] are getting no consideration whatsoever’ (Hollway 2002: 23; see also Hollway and Featherstone 1997). It may in fact be an especially difficult time for the middle-class mothers I interviewed, since, according to Bailey (2000) and Lupton (2000), middle-class mothers in particular have very high ideals about what good mothering entails. For them, a good mother can give total love and attention to their child. Yet, as Hollway goes on to argue, mothers are bound to feel ambivalent about their extremely demanding children. As well as love, they will feel what Hollway, drawing on Kleinian psychoanalysis, calls hate. Hate, here, does not refer to intense hatred, but rather to anything that is not unconditional love: irritation, dislike, guilt, obligation, and so on. Hollway (2002: 22) suggests that while maternal ‘hate’ is inevitable, and indeed a necessary part of the child’s development (since a child can only be recognized as a subject by a subject she sees as different from herself), hateful feelings towards children are not necessarily acted out.

In thinking about the interviews I conducted, and about my own ways of seeing photographs of my children, I would like to suggest that perhaps one of the reasons hateful feelings towards children are not acted out by this group of women, at least, is because photographs can work to steady the ambivalent feelings of love and hate that most mothers have towards their children. The photographic trace of the child can evoke all the love and the hate because it is looked at and then put away. The photograph, and the (trace of the) child is put away and the hate, for a moment, is done. Perhaps then, for some mothers, the most important part of doing family photography is when the looking stops.

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Notes

1 As well as recording most of the interviews, I made detailed notes after each one about gestures and body language; interpreting the interviews, I tried to pay as
much attention to pauses and silences and hesitations as to the spoken words.

2 The only woman who showed any interest in digital cameras had a mother-in-law who was a professional photographer who had used digital cameras for a long time.

3 One preliminary indication of this is that although most of my interviewees disliked being photographed, they all told me that they had made sure that they had photographs of themselves with their children. I should also emphasize at this point that these are all heterosexual mothers. Indeed, it struck me on many occasions when I visited these houses that the ubiquitous display of family photographs was a very powerful example of the heterosexing of domestic space.

4 This paper also theorizes the claim made here and not elaborated, that it is in the performative relation between image and spectator that the space of display is produced.

5 This mother had thrown out all her family photos that were not in albums or frames when she emigrated to England from South Africa.

6 Non-English readers may need 'naff' and 'sad' as used in this context explained. 'Naff' means a bit inept, a bit tasteless; 'sad' is a light-hearted reference to being in need of pity.

7 I have elaborated this referentiality elsewhere (see Rose 2003).

8 This is why the women I spoke with were so uninterested in digital cameras, I think. Digital images do not have the same tactile facticity as traditional photographs. They do not feel the same.

9 These comments must be tentative for two reasons. Firstly, I have rather little interview evidence to support them. Secondly, as Hollway (2002) argues, understanding the dynamics of mothering is an extraordinarily complex project because of women's very different psychic histories.

References


**Abstract translations**

«Tout le monde est dorloté et ça paraît vraiment bien»: une exploration géographique de l’émotion de quelques mamans et de leurs photos de famille

Cet article porte sur un projet de recherche qualitative mené à petite échelle. À partir d’entrevues en profondeur semi structurées, l’objectif est d’explorer ce que font de leurs photos de famille un groupe particulier de mères caucasiennes ayant de jeunes enfants et issues de la classe moyenne. Nos résultats d’entrevues ont révélé que ce groupe de femmes ressentaient une ambivalence envers leurs photos. D’un côté, les photos représentaient des objets précieux évoquant une réaction émotion intense; de l’autre, elles représentaient des objets banals et anodins. Cet article explore ce paradoxe émotionnel et entend en faire une propriété de la proximité spatiale au cœur même de ces clichés familiaux et que les mères qualifient comme étant la «joie d’être ensemble». Cette joie d’être ensemble a aussi été exprimée par le corps de différentes manières en relation aux photos. Cet article avance également l’idée plus générale selon laquelle les études menées sur l’imagerie visuelle doivent faire attention aux façons spécifiques, diverses et multi sensorielles de se nouer à des images particulières lorsqu’elles sont «regardées».

**Mots-clefs:** photos, famille, joie d’être ensemble, visualité, soins maternels.
'Todos están acurrucados y simplemente parece chulo': una geografía sentimental de algunas madres y sus fotos familiares

Este papel se basa en una investigación cualitativa a escala pequeña, que utiliza entrevistas semi-estructuradas para explorar lo que un grupo de madres blancas de la clase media con hijos pequeños hacían con sus fotos familiares. Según las entrevistas, era evidente que este grupo de mujeres tenía sentimientos encontrados hacia las fotos. Por un lado, se veían las fotos como objetos preciosos que provocaban una reacción emocional muy intensa; por otro lado se consideraban las fotos como banals y triviales. El papel explora esta paradoja emocional y sugiere que forma parte de la proximidad espacial tan fundamental en estas fotos familiares; lo que las madres llaman 'unión'. Esta 'unión' fue representada también de manera corpórea, de varios modos en relación con las fotos. Por lo tanto el papel también sugiere, por regla general, que los estudios de imaginería visual deberían prestar más atención a cómo la gente se relaciona con imágenes de modos específicos, diversos y multi-sensoriales a la hora de verlas.

Palabras claves: fotógrafos, familia, 'unión', visualizar, mimar.