

# Family Photographs

## A Generic Description

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In this essay, I will describe and analyze three photographs to determine if a genre of family photographs exists. I am interested in family communication and want to discover ways in which family members rhetorically construct themselves as a unit. Toward that end, I address the situational requirements necessary for a particular response, a description of the artifacts collected, an analysis of the substantive and stylistic features of the artifacts, and an overall pattern of organization for this genre.

### Situational Requirements

The first step in generic description is the observation of similarities in rhetorical responses to particular situations. In other words, in order for an artifact to exist that might be called a *family photograph*, a number of elements must be present. The elements on which I briefly focus include the need for a family, a camera, a photographer, and an audience:

(1) The most obvious element required to be present is a family. The definition of *family* is much broader now than it has been in years past, as evidenced by new descriptors such as *blended families*, which did not exist a short time ago. The situational requirement, therefore, is a broadly defined one: whether the group members consider themselves to be traditional or nontraditional, the subjects being photographed must perceive themselves to be a family.

(2) The presence of a camera is necessary to the situation. Because many cameras are relatively inexpensive, they are accessible to the general population; people from almost every economic class, therefore, are able to present themselves as a family in front of a camera.

(3) A photographer must be present. Unless the photograph is taken with a camera with time-delay capability, family photos are taken with a non-family member as onlooker and producer.

(4) An audience is required. Why else would a family stop, pull together, smooth hair, and smile broadly at no one in particular? The family members know that the photograph will capture them in a particular moment, so they collect themselves enough to present themselves in ways that clearly show they are a family. The family itself could be the audience the photograph most persuades; in collecting family photos, we constantly reassure ourselves that we are members of the culturally valued group called a *family*.

### Description of Artifacts

The artifacts I have chosen to analyze are three photographs of family groups. They include the Varallo family photograph, the Chryslée-Miller family photograph, and the Marty-Rhoades family photograph. All of the photographs are of immediate family members, and all of the families are white and middle class.

This essay was written while Sharon M. Varallo was a student in Sonja K. Foss's rhetorical criticism class at Ohio State University in 1994. Used by permission of the author.



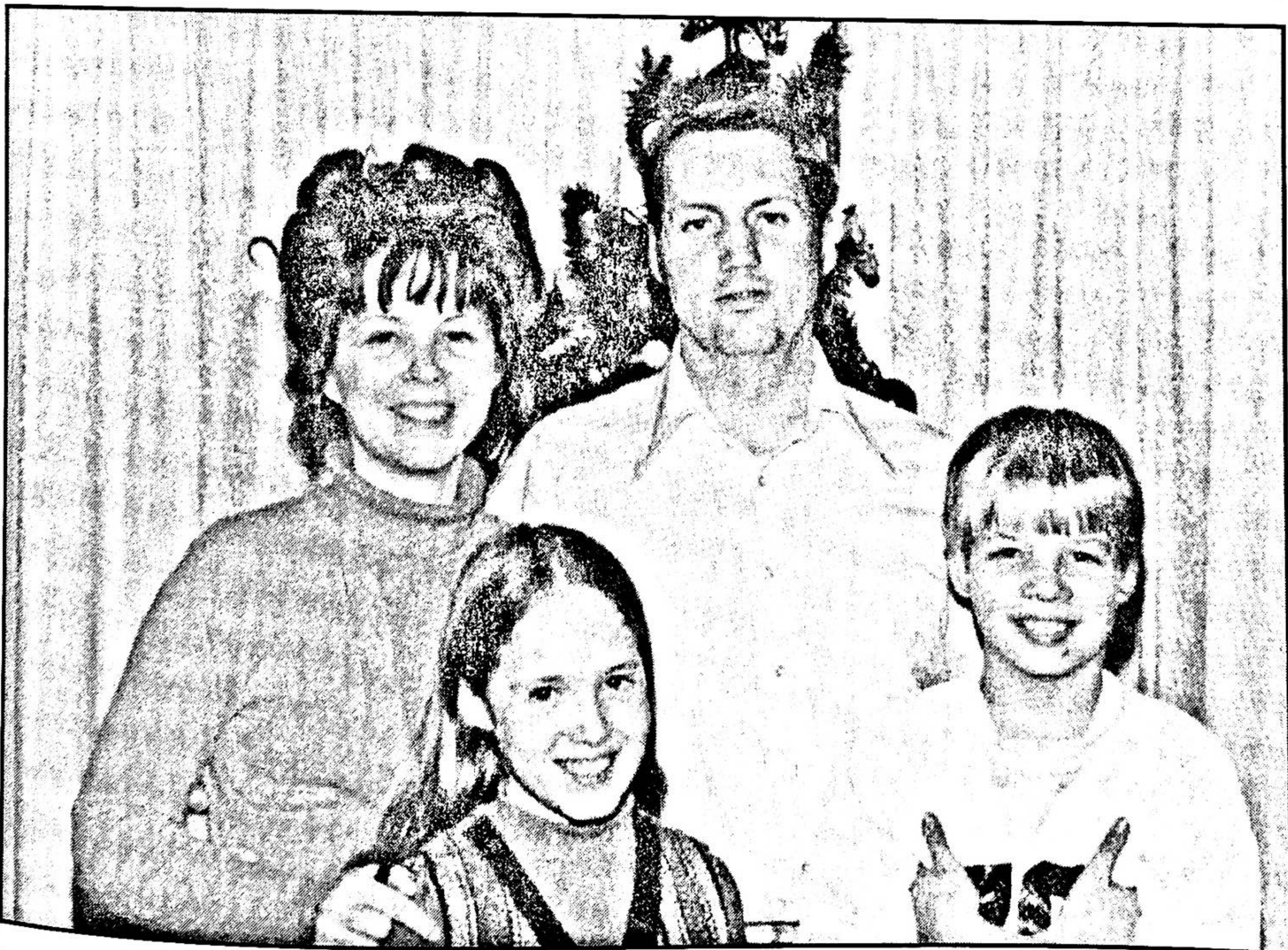
The Varallo family photograph was taken in December, 1973, during the Christmas holiday season. The photograph shows a mother, father, son, and daughter standing in front of a Christmas tree. The tree, decorated with plastic confections, is positioned in front of a window covered with white patterned curtains. The children are standing in front of their parents. The father's arm is encircling his wife, who, in turn, is touching her daughter. The son stands independently. The females are wearing primarily red, and the males are dressed primarily in white.

The Chryslee-Miller family photograph was taken in May of 1992 prior to a graduation ceremony for the older son. The photograph includes a mother and father and two sons, one of whom is dressed in a graduation cap and gown. The family members are standing in a line, all in close proximity to one another, obviously convening around the graduating son. The mother has her arms around both her sons, the father has his arm around his older son, and the younger son has his arm around his mother. The photograph was taken in front of a tree in the family's backyard.

The Marty-Rhoades photograph was taken during a vacation trip to visit family in August, 1992. The photograph includes two women who are partners and co-parents and their seven-year-old daughter. This family is shown huddled on a rock that is jutting out into the ocean, and the background is of the water and shoreline reefs. Both women are touching their daughter, and she appears to be leaning against them. They all are wearing casual clothing.

### Substantive and Stylistic Elements

A substantive and stylistic analysis of the photographs uncovers the meanings present in the artifacts. In the case of non-discursive artifacts such as photographs,



The Varallo family. (All images also included in color photo gallery.)



substantive and stylistic elements cannot be separated; thus, both will be discussed together. This stage of generic description finds the similarities in the artifacts and considers what those similar elements might signify. As similarities in the photographs are uncovered, their importance or unimportance to a genre of family photographs also is addressed.

First, the children tend to be positioned in front of and physically lower than the adults. In the Varallo and Marty-Rhoades photographs, the children are positioned in front of and physically lower than the adults; this positioning is not surprising given that the children are, after all, shorter than the parents. However, in many family photographs where the children are taller than the parents, the children often are positioned so they are shorter than the parents. Julia Hirsch (1981) discusses a possible reason for this feature of family photography:

The authority of these conventions, like the hold of traditional family roles which still makes us want strong fathers and nurturing mothers, loving children and sheltering homes, is difficult for any of us to resist. Professional as well as amateur photographers still place families in poses that express and cater to these longings. (p. 12)

Hirsch's revelation of the family as a metaphor for all of humankind gives any representation of the family a much greater significance. Families pose for formal photographs to show themselves as a family *should* be. The positioning of the subjects to ensure the distinction between the matriarch/patriarch and the children seems necessary to the genre.

A second similarity is that all the people are sitting or standing in close proximity to one another. Perhaps some of this closeness is required for everyone to fit into the picture, but the picture could be taken from a distance to produce a longer shot, so the physical closeness is not a necessity for the photograph itself. This closeness clearly suggests to an onlooker that the family is one unit. By standing near one another, the family members create a distinct and distinguishable group. To fit into the genre of the ideal family photograph, the members should be standing close to one another.

A third similarity related to the first two is that the mothers touch their children, while the fathers are less likely to do so. The Marty-Rhoades mothers are connecting the most obviously with their daughter; their warmth and intimacy are apparent from their comfortable connection with one another. The other mothers also touch their children in "natural" ways that the fathers do not. The Chrystlee-Miller father has his hand on his son's shoulder but otherwise does not appear to be touching him and is standing directly forward in an independent stance. The Varallo father is touching only his wife. The connections of the mothers to the daughters show nurturing and protective women, and the separation of the fathers and the sons shows independence and distance: both are the kinds of behaviors that fit within the traditional family mold addressed by Hirsch and are an element necessary to the ideal genre.

Fourth, women seem to have paid more attention to their appearance than the men and, overall, seem to have been concerned more with presenting a pleasing image. The Varallo woman has on make-up and a wig and has thin, finely plucked eyebrows, as was the fashion at that time. The Chrystlee-Miller woman has coordinated accessories—a red belt and red earrings—to add flair to her dress. Albeit more subtly, the Rhoades and Marty women also have on jewelry, and the daughter is wearing small post earrings. In all the photographs, the women's dress closely matches that



of the other women in the photograph, as if they coordinated their efforts: the Varallo females are wearing red, and the Rhoades and Marty women are dressed similarly in style—they are wearing comfortable, kick-about clothing. Finally, all the women are smiling broadly. These elements combine to present an image of women as, perhaps, the filler of a more nurturing role. After all, the Chrysee-Miller and Varallo fathers—and the adult Chrysee-Miller sons—did not feel the need to smile: they present themselves as more independent and more of what traditionally might be called *strong*. The women perhaps are showing the traditional roles expected of them as part of a family. Their concern with a pleasing image is both individual and group oriented and influences the showing of the entire family.

Yet another characteristic that distinguishes the photographs is their optimism. The Marty-Rhoades family members have open-mouthed smiles as if laughing in response to a joke. The Varallo photograph is of people smiling for the camera, seemingly on command. The Varallo father is the only unsmiling person, and, as such, he stands out. The Chrysee-Miller photograph evidences optimism in yet another way: it celebrates a family milestone as the members have gathered for a son's graduation. These observations coincide with Hirsch's: "Family photographs, so generous with views of darling babies and loving couples, do not show grades failed, jobs lost, opportunities missed . . . . The family pictures we like best are poignant—and optimistic" (p. 118). We are motivated to fit the image. Optimism, not realism, is important to family photographs.

A sixth characteristic feature of the photographs is that the pictures are posed. These photographs, although seemingly natural, are not candid. Everyone except the Chrysee-Miller graduate is looking directly at the camera, and each person seems acutely aware of being photographed. In this way, photographs present a kind of normalcy that is not normal: my family never stood that way unless we were getting our picture taken, and chances are the Chrysee-Miller and Marty-Rhoades families usually did not stand in that fashion on a normal day. This awareness and posing seem important to the genre as well.

The backgrounds in the photographs clearly were important and consciously chosen, perhaps to help represent the image of the family; this is a seventh characteristic of the photographs. All the photographs were taken during a special event, an event that is clear from an analysis of the background details. The Varallo photograph was snapped at Christmas time, and the family members positioned themselves in front of the Christmas tree. The Chrysee-Miller family stood in front of a tree in their backyard, gathered around a graduate. The Marty-Rhoades family, standing with the ocean as a backdrop, were clearly out of the ordinary settings of their usual lives. Part of the catalyst for taking the photographs seems to have been the event itself. Special events, therefore, also may be integral to the ideal family photograph.

The backgrounds in these particular photographs may offer insights into a critique of the genre of family photographs. The decorations on the Varallo tree, for instance, are sugar-coated, plastic candy ornaments. The Christmas tree was a pretend tree, the decorations were pretend confections, and our presentation of ourselves as the ideal family was pretend. We also stood in front of a window, perhaps symbolizing our desire for public approval, and the window is covered with curtains, perhaps symbolizing our need to hide the "real" family. The star on the Christmas tree is directly above the patriarch's head, crown like, giving the male a kingly air. The Chrysee-Miller photograph was taken in front of a tree in the backyard, and part of the house is



visible in the background, serving to reinforce the representation of the traditional family. The most open background of all the photographs is in the photograph of the Marty-Rhoades family. Interestingly, their environment is natural. While the Varallo family seems limited to one way of showing a family, the Marty-Rhoades family is the most open of all, not just in background but in the family structure itself. As lesbian partners and parents, they present a family that likely would garner objection in traditional circles. Their family photograph, however, shows a more open, natural setting and clearly shows the most sincere warmth. Their smiles are genuine, while the others, though not necessarily fake, are obviously primarily for the camera.

That these photographs rarely capture the subjects' feet is an eighth characteristic of the genre of family photographs. Only upper torsos are visible in the Varallo and Chryslée-Miller photographs, and we barely see the feet of the Marty and Rhoades women. Although this photographic choice may have some symbolic significance, it does not appear vital to the genre.

Finally, similarities exist in the physical presentations of the photographs. The Marty-Rhoades photograph is enlarged and framed and usually sat on a table in the family's living room. The framing and public showing of the picture added to the impression that the family is special. The photograph was set apart, given a place of honor on a table, put out to be admired and to remind those who saw it most often—the two women and their daughter—that they were, indeed, a family. Although the framing and presentation of the photograph reinforces the ideal family it presents, that the photograph be framed is not vital to the genre. The other two photographs, for instance, are normal-sized photographs and have been in both private and public places, ranging from the "photo drawer" to a bulletin board; they still seem to qualify as participants in this genre.

## Organizing Principles of the Genre

In summary, the substantive and stylistic elements that seem vital to the genre include the presentation of:

- (1) higher (status) positioning of the patriarch and/or matriarch
- (2) close physical proximity of the family members
- (3) mothers touching the children and touching more in general
- (4) women more concerned with presenting a pleasing image
- (5) optimism, usually evidenced in smiles
- (6) a posed group
- (7) backgrounds showing a special event

If all of these elements are present and the situational requirements are met, a photograph would seem to fit into a distinct category of family photography. From these observations, I conclude that there is, indeed, a genre of family photographs. The necessary elements noted in the previous section are substantial enough to warrant the inclusion of a new genre in the realm of generic criticism.

## Conclusion

These photographs undoubtedly serve to convince and reinforce the "proper" family image to society at large and also to the families themselves. The photographs



probably serve as a strong element of self-persuasion; in Hirsch's words, perhaps we are both seller and consumer of the idea of the ideal family. Formal family photography deals with character (Hirsch, p. 82), and few are willing to preserve for eternity a flawed image. None of the families evidenced in these photographs remains intact today—all three dissolved through divorce or separation of the parents. Nowhere, however, is family strife shown in any of these photographs. We all have our central identities at stake, and we therefore present ourselves as a unified family, the rules of which implicitly seem to be known.

## Reference

Hirsch, J. (1981). *Family photographs*. New York: Oxford University Press.