



The Psychological Impact of Family Photo Sessions on Intrafamilial Relationships

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Abstract

The article examines not so much photography as a static visual object as the psychological effects of the family photo-shoot procedure itself and its influence on the dynamics of intrafamilial relationships. The aim of the study is to clarify and analytically describe the key mental mechanisms through which joint participation in the shooting process strengthens the sense of cohesion and improves the family's emotional climate. The empirical-theoretical basis includes a synthesis of a systematic review of research in social psychology, art therapy, and the sociology of visual culture, as well as a qualitative analysis of a case study of the author's photographic approach that integrates artistic and psychological principles. It is shown that the therapeutic potential of a family photo session is realized primarily through two complementary mechanisms: 1) co-construction of a positive family narrative, in which the very process of shooting becomes a significant shared biographical episode and strengthens the experience of we; 2) emotional anchoring, in which tactile and visual stimuli during the shoot (hugs, laughter) form stable associations with feelings of safety and joy, and subsequent viewing of the images reactivates these states. The case study analysis indicates high effectiveness of the method, as evidenced by client retention (70%) and referrals (40%). When organized as an event oriented toward process rather than product, the family photo session serves as an effective tool for strengthening intrafamilial relationships. The findings are intended for family psychologists, art therapy specialists, and professional photographers interested in integrating a psychological component into their practice.

Keywords: Family Photography, Intrafamilial Relationships, Therapeutic Photography, Phototherapy, Emotional Anchoring, Family Narrative, Shared Experiences, Family Cohesion, Family Psychology, Art Therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Modern economics demonstrates a shift in consumer priorities toward an experience economy model, in which the primacy is given to the apprehension of a unique experience rather than the ownership of things [1]. This shift is directly manifested in the structure of household expenditures. Statistics for 2024 record an unprecedented intensification of interest in services that create shared memories: in the third quarter of 2024, spending on cultural events, sports, and leisure organization increased year over year and reached the highest levels in recent years [2]. Such a surge indicates a stable and growing demand for practices that strengthen family bonds through jointly lived positive emotions. Within this logic, a professional family photo shoot goes beyond simple documentation and acquires the status of a significant sociocultural ritual.

Historically, family photography—from its origins in the

nineteenth century to the digital present—has performed the function of constructing and maintaining family identity [3, 4]. The family album served as a visual archive that not so much represented everyday life as it shaped an idealized image of the happy family. Studies in the sociology of visual culture demonstrate systematic content selection: leisure, holidays, and moments of unity predominantly enter the frame, whereas conflicts, everyday difficulties, illnesses, and losses remain outside the visual narrative [5]. Thus, the mythologeme of cohesion is maintained and transmitted both within the family and outward. The gender dimension is also significant: traditionally, the role of keeper and archivist of family memory has been assigned to the woman, primarily the mother [8]. By organizing shoots and maintaining albums, she often remained behind the scenes, giving rise to the phenomenon of the invisible mother: her presence is assumed but not visually confirmed [5].

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Despite a substantial body of research that treats family photographs as cultural artifacts, a significant gap remains. The scientific focus has shifted to the final product—photographs and albums, their content, and their role in shaping collective memory and identity [7, 18]. Meanwhile, the photo shoot itself as a dynamic, jointly experienced event with independent psychological and therapeutic potential has been scarcely analyzed. The influence of the interactive shooting experience on the emotional climate and cohesion of the family requires dedicated theoretical consideration.

Accordingly, the **aim** of the study is to identify and theoretically substantiate the psychological mechanisms by which participation in a family photo shoot influences the dynamics of intrafamily relationships.

The scientific novelty of the work lies in the first comprehensive consideration of the family photo shoot process as a therapeutic practice that integrates approaches of co-constructing narrative from family psychology and emotional anchoring from cognitive psychology.

The author's hypothesis posits that a process-oriented family photo shoot aimed at eliciting and capturing authentic positive interactions exerts a long-term favorable effect on family cohesion and emotional well-being by forming a powerful shared memory and creating visual anchors of positive affective states.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is interdisciplinary in nature and relies on an integrated methodological design that combines theoretical reflection with the analysis of empirical practice. The key procedures are a systematic literature review and qualitative case study analytics.

The systematic review was conducted to build the theoretical foundation of the work. The field of analysis includes peer-reviewed publications from the international abstract databases Scopus and Web of Science over the past five years. The search strategies were oriented toward thematic clusters relevant to the research task: family psychology, art therapy, sociology of visual culture, the theory of family narratives, and cognitive psychology. The application of this approach made it possible to map the basic conceptual frameworks for studying family relationships, visual practices, and mechanisms of psychological influence.

Qualitative case study analysis was used to examine the empirical corpus presented by materials describing the photographer's proprietary methodology. This approach, designated as the author's method of psychological and art photography and applied since 2021, is considered in the present study as a single yet illustrative case. The analytical procedure includes a deconstruction of the methodological logic, an explication of its implicit theoretical foundations

— in particular, the principles of emotional anchoring and bodily memory — as well as an interpretation of the presented quantitative indicators of effectiveness. As such indicators, data from more than 120 photo sessions were used: 70% of clients return for repeat sessions, and 40% of new clients come through referrals. These metrics are interpreted as indirect markers of the high subjective value and psychological effectiveness of the method.

The comparison and synthesis of the results obtained provide an integrated analytical perspective on the psychological impact of family photo sessions, linking theoretical constructs with practical outcomes and market dynamics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of research and cultural practice reveals a fundamental tension intractably embedded in family photography. On the one hand, it has historically served as a mechanism for constructing and maintaining the myth of the happy family [7]. This myth, deliberately cultivated, in particular, by the Kodak company since the early twentieth century, prescribed recording predominantly joyful, cloudless episodes, shaping for descendants and external audiences an airbrushed image of family existence [6]. Such a normative optics creates palpable social pressure: participants are compelled to align everyday life with a predetermined ideal, displacing conflicts and difficulties; as a result, a visual simulation of closeness arises instead of a representation of real relationships. On the other hand, photography is potentially capable of documenting and strengthening genuine emotional bonds, becoming evidence of real tenderness and shared involvement.

The duality manifests most vividly in the very procedure of shooting. The classical staged session oriented toward the flawless shot paradoxically intensifies psychological distance among relatives. The protocol that entails prolonged posing, standardized smiles, and strict adherence to the photographer's regulations is often associated with stress, fatigue, and performative behavior, especially with regard to children [6]. The participants' current experience may not coincide with the joy displayed in the image, provoking inner dissonance and alienation. In contrast, the therapeutically oriented approach presented in the analyzed case turns the shooting process itself into a means of reducing this distance: the emphasis shifts from the result (the ideal image) to the jointly lived event. The photographer constructs a safe and comfortable frame in which the family interacts naturally—play, laugh, hug, just be. Thus, a fundamental paradigm shift occurs: from the task to synthesize an ideal to the goal to experience and record an authentic moment. It is precisely this shift that determines the therapeutic potential of the family photo session. A comparative analysis of the two approaches is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of family photography paradigms (compiled by the author based on [6, 9, 11]).

Criterion	Traditional staged photography	Therapeutically oriented photography (as illustrated by a case study)
Purpose of the shoot	Creation of an idealized, aesthetically impeccable image of the family.	Capture of authentic interaction and strengthening of emotional bonds.
Role of the photographer	Director-like figure providing clear instructions on poses and facial expressions.	Facilitator and observer creating conditions for the natural expression of emotions.
Process	Structured posing, adherence to a predefined script.	Natural interaction, play, communication, improvisation.
Emotional state of participants	Tension, fatigue, performativity, a drive to meet expectations.	Relaxation, joy, engagement, spontaneity.
Result (product)	Formally beautiful yet often static and emotionally restrained images.	Live, dynamic, emotionally rich photographs conveying the authenticity of the moment.
Psychological effect	Affirmation of a social ideal, a possible sense of mismatch with reality, formal replenishment of the archive.	Strengthening of emotional ties, increase in self-esteem, creation of a positive shared memory.

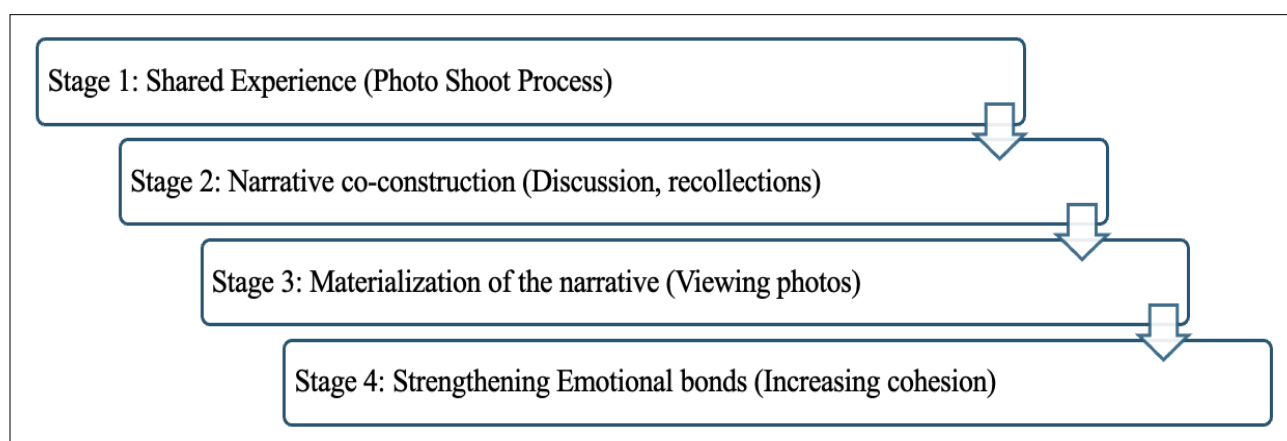
Thus, the proposed therapeutic format shifts the family photo shoot from a stressor to a resourceful experience that autonomously enhances the family's emotional well-being.

Accumulated psychological research consistently demonstrates that co-experienced events are a system-forming factor of family cohesion and mental well-being [19]. The practice of joint reminiscing functions not as a mere exchange of facts, but as a key context for the development in children of autobiographical memory, the formation of self-awareness, and the acquisition of emotional regulation strategies [12]. In such conversations, the family not only remembers but also constructs and reconstructs its own past, assigning shared meaning to events and shaping a unique family narrative. This narrative, weaving the child's personal episodes into a broader family context, forms a sense of belonging, a stable identity, and continuit   [13, 14].

Against this background, a family photo shoot intentionally organized as a positive and engaging event becomes an effective instrument for the purposeful production of raw material for the narrative. Unlike everyday, routine episodes,

it constitutes a structured event taken out of ordinary life, initially marked as special and memorable. The photo shoot functions as a narrative node with a clear dramaturgy (preparation, climax — the shooting process itself, denouement — joint viewing), which facilitates subsequent verbalization and the assembling of the experience into a coherent story (Remember how, at that shoot, Dad tossed you almost up to the sky?).

The photographs themselves subsequently act as powerful visual memory supports: they not only illustrate the account but also initiate it, acting as triggers of recollection. Each act of joint viewing initiates the renewed narrating and re-experiencing of the associated episodes. The process of co-constructing the narrative consolidates not only the cognitive fixation of the event but also the positive emotions associated with it. A positive feedback cycle emerges: positive co-experiencing (the photo shoot) generates a favorable narrative materialized in photographs; their viewing reactivates this narrative and the associated warm feelings, which, in turn, strengthens emotional bonds and family cohesion. This conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.


Fig.1. Conceptual model of the transformation of photo shoot experience into family cohesion (compiled by the author based on [14, 16, 17]).

Thus, the photo shoot is transformed from a simple recording of a moment into a launching platform for the construction and repeated reproduction of a positive family narrative, which is operationalized as a resource for strengthening intra-family ties.

One of the key, though often underestimated, mechanisms of the psychological impact of a process-oriented photo shoot is emotional anchoring. Within this framework, which traces back to neurolinguistic programming and cognitive psychology, an external or internal stimulus (trigger) becomes stably associated with a particular affective state [15]. Subsequent reactivation of the stimulus automatically initiates the corresponding emotional response; in its logic this process is close to classical conditioning.

In the present case of a family photo shoot, the photographer effectively assumes the role of architect of a positive experience, purposefully arranging conditions for the formation of such anchors. In a safe, supportive environment, the photographer elicits natural expressions of closeness and joy, systematically engaging multisensory stimuli:

- Tactile: hugs, holding hands, light touches.
- Visual: direct eye contact, smiles.
- Auditory: laughter, tender addresses.
- Kinesthetic: joint movements, games, tossing children.

These actions induce peak positive affective states in participants—tenderness, joy, a sense of safety, love, and unity. At the moment of maximum intensity of the experience, fixation occurs—the shutter is released. In this mode, the image preserves not only the visual configuration of the scene but also consolidates the associated sensory signals and affective tone, serving as a powerful, multifaceted visual anchor.

The specificity of the photographic anchor lies in its durability, portability, and capacity to transmit the peak emotional state across time and space. Unlike a rapidly fading memory, the photograph possesses material substance. Upon subsequent engagement with the image, the brain, via associative pathways, does not limit itself to cognitive reconstruction of the event (we felt good then), but initiates the original psychophysiological response. A deeper, affectively saturated experience arises, allowing one to feel warmth and closeness anew. This explains the observation in the case: clients for the first time saw themselves from the outside in moments of genuine love and support and begin to perceive themselves and their loved ones differently, with greater warmth, acceptance, and pride. The photograph not only represents this feeling—it facilitates its internal reconsolidation. The process of formation and activation of the anchor is schematically shown in Figure 2.

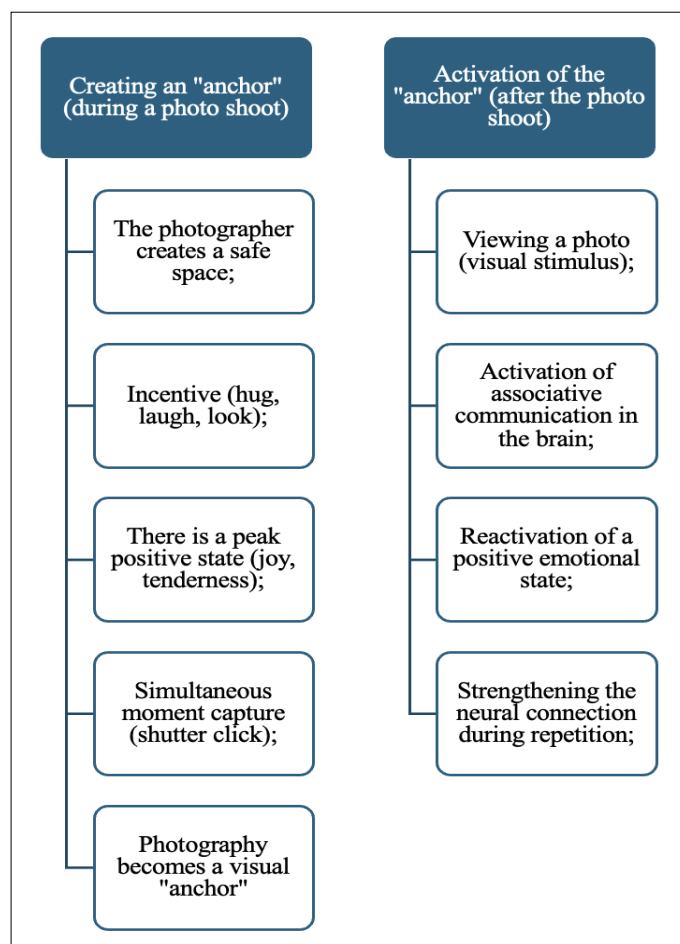


Fig.2. Emotional anchoring process in a family photoshoot (compiled by the author based on [14, 20, 21]).

Each repeated viewing of the image strengthens the formed neural pathway, as a result of which the anchor acquires increasing regulatory power. Thus, the family receives not merely a set of aesthetically expressive images but an effective tool for self-regulation and for maintaining a stable positive emotional background.

The quantitative parameters describing the author's approach serve as objective indicators of its high subjective value for clients. Data collected since 2021 across more than 120 photoshoots record that about 70% of customers return for repeat sessions, and over 40% of new clients come through referrals. In the segment of services not related to essential goods, such levels of retention and loyalty indicate the fulfillment of a deep, meaningful need that goes beyond the simple acquisition of a high-quality visual product. With a high degree of confidence, it can be concluded that people return not so much for the photographs as such, but for the repeated experience of the positive psychological state obtained during the shooting process.

This effect is explained by a combination of psychological mechanisms and macroeconomic trends. The high share of repeat engagements points to a shift in consumer perception: from purchasing photographs to investing in family relationships and memories. The service ceases to be a one-

off transaction and is integrated into family culture as a ritual for marking significant life stages (anniversaries, pregnancy, the birth and growing up of children). This positioning fully resonates with the logic of the experience economy, within which payment is made not for a thing but for a meaningful experience that enriches life and strengthens social ties [1].

The economic success of the method under consideration directly correlates with its psychological effectiveness: clients are willing to pay for the service again and actively recommend it to their circle, which reflects an exceptional level of satisfaction with the emotional experience lived through. This confirms the market viability of an approach that combines artistic expressiveness with therapeutic benefit.

Thus, analysis of the case study from a market perspective shows that the therapeutically oriented photoshoot functions simultaneously as a psychologically effective practice and a demanded commercial product that meets the deep requests of contemporary society for authenticity, emotional connectedness, and the construction of valuable memories.

CONCLUSION

The conducted study allows us to conclude that a family photo session is not merely a technological procedure for capturing images but an intensive psychological practice capable of noticeably transforming the dynamics of intra-family interaction. Its therapeutic potential is realized at the moment of transition from a traditional, staged, outcome-oriented model to a process-oriented approach in which authentic shared experience and lively, genuine communication occupy a central place.

Within the scope of this work, two core mechanisms of psychological influence were identified and theoretically substantiated. The first is the co-construction of a positive family narrative: the very course of the shoot becomes a meaningful shared experience that is subsequently integrated into the family's collective memory, strengthening its historical continuity and sense of belonging. The second is emotional anchoring: positive affective states induced by tactile and verbal stimuli during the shoot are stably coupled with the created visual representations. As a result, photographs act as long-term anchors capable, upon subsequent viewing, of reactivating experiences of joy, tenderness, and closeness.

The author's hypothesis received empirical confirmation. A comprehensive analysis of the theoretical foundations and data from an applied case study demonstrated that a shoot organized with an emphasis on natural and positive interaction forms a prolonged beneficial effect. It enhances family cohesion through the formation and repeated reproduction of a shared positive memory and also creates visual triggers for accessing resourceful emotional states.

The practical significance of the study is multidimensional. For family psychologists and art therapists, a specific and accessible tool is substantiated — a therapeutically oriented photo session recommended as an additional or preventive practice for improving the emotional climate, strengthening attachment, and gently resolving latent conflicts. For professional photographers, a conceptual framework is proposed that allows them to reflect on their own activity not only from an aesthetic but also from a psychological perspective. Mastery of the described mechanisms opens opportunities for professional growth, strengthening the value proposition, and transitioning from the role of executor to the function of facilitator of meaningful family experience.

As a vector for further research, it is advisable to conduct longitudinal empirical projects including control groups. Such a design will make it possible to quantitatively assess the long-term impact of therapeutically oriented photo sessions on validated indicators of family functioning and well-being (in particular, through standardized questionnaires FACES-IV or Family APGAR with pre- and post-measurements after a series of sessions), which will lend additional methodological rigor to the resulting conclusions.

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