

Deconstructing the Family Album Domestic Violence in Sensory Ethnography, Postmemory and Photography

Gemma Lynch
lynchgb@gmail.com

Introduction

When looking at our family album, you would never imagine that anything had been wrong. This is because all family photos are constructs, brief moments that do not show us the reality outside of the frame. Memory, however, is a mediator and is able to tell us what the photograph cannot. To analyze the album and memory in tandem means that «[t]he photographic archive may become a site from which the narration of history rather than its censorship takes place» (Cross, Peck 2010: 129). This invites us to question the authenticity of the photos themselves and gives agency to the feelings that arise about them with each viewing.

My parents' marriage lasted almost thirty years, and during this time we saw the episodes of dad's aggressive and intimidating behavior increase with intensity. I left the UK shortly before their divorce was finalized and have lived in Italy ever since. I made the decision to revisit my childhood memories as part of my academic research in Visual Anthropology because domestic violence remains a relatively uncovered field and the silence around the topic prevents us from understanding its impact in our societies. Domestic violence is multifaceted, complex, and different in every home. Also, it is not a static phenomenon for any family; it can change and evolve over time due to the family circumstances and may vary greatly across nations and cultures. I can only offer my personal experience and do not presume to make generalizations about the experiences of domestic violence for others.

In this work¹ I am both researcher and participant, therefore I can provide an embodied perspective that would otherwise be inaccessible. By incorporating the sensory experience and lived memory, I am representing an underrepresented group of adults who grew up with domestic violence (Metta 2013: 733-734). It is my hope that by analysing my family album, I can demonstrate how self-reflecting through personal photos can be a tool for healing from traumatic experiences. Family photographs are not simply physical objects we collect and share for visual referencing; they are tools for social awareness (Edwards, Hart 2005; Sandbye 2014).

One of the aims of my research is to increase self-knowledge, but I also invite others to ask themselves questions about the visual representations of their familial histories and what can be learned from revisiting family albums in general. To analyse photography and its role in our lives is a practice that visual and applied anthropology is well positioned to explore, particularly as a format that is in constant evolution and as one which plays such a key role in experience and memory.

If we concede that any explorative family album work is influenced by the challenge using memory as the main source material, experimental and artistic works provide an avenue for expressing this.

¹ This text is an extract from my MA thesis in Visual and Media Anthropology at HMKW University of Berlin (2022).

Contemporary literature in the field of Photography suggests that more work is emerging on the topic of family photography in the defence of «politicised formation of memory» (Cross 2014: 43). An example of this is *Inventing my Father* (2014) by photographer Diana Markosian who used her family album to explore her relationship with her estranged father after being reunited with him twenty years later. Markosian's work is an invitation to engage and empathise with an experience of paternal absence, putting familial trauma into the public sphere through the format of family photography. The photographer Alba Zari also created a photographic series based on her attempt to recreate her biological father in her project *The Y* (2019).



Image from *Inventing my Father*, Diana Markosian (2013-2014)

From a theoretical perspective: «The ambiguity and dual pull towards evidential documentation (showing) and constructed ideal (obscuring) of personal photographs have made them particularly attractive to those who struggle to establish a sense of self in the wake of traumatic experiences» (Pedri 2018: 3). Therapeutic photography represents a proactive approach to the effects of traumatic memories and postmemory. By creating an artwork or project that synthesizes what the artist has learned through the photos, they have transformed their trauma into what Winnicott would call a «transferable object» (1953: 2). The photo *is* a transferable object — as is the trauma. It has taken form externally from our bodies and minds where it has been causing pain. Existing now outside from us, it creates space for objectivity and healing (Weiser 2010: 17).

Working with the album in the hopes of healing is not impaired by this oscillation between truth and fiction, memory and imagination, it's a useful tool. Ultimately the artist has the total freedom to explore as much of their traumatic memory as is comfortable, by being both objective and subjective about the narrative they are choosing to share, applying, «attachment and detachment as a binary conceptual framework» (Langford 2001: 36). In the examples listed so far there is a temporal element; many years have passed between the creation of the images and the work being done by the artist. While this may be circumstantial, the suggestion is that a significant passage of time is a necessary component for effective album work and gives the artist a period of detachment and reflection which is followed by the desire to reconnect and investigate. Revisiting the familiar after many years reminds us that *we* have changed, even if the photos are always the same. For Pedri, this is the demonstration that, «ultimately,

they [artists] turn to personal photographs as part of the process to represent histories of self that run counter to the dominant views of what can be shown and, by extension, known» (Pedri 2018: 4). This process can be applied to all social issues irrespective of an artistic framework. For instance, in the use of family archives of migrants and displaced persons (Palmberger, Tošić 2016).

Applying Therapeutic Photography

My family album was the primary source of my data collection, and the photographs serve as anchor points to provide a way to connect to the past and explore what emerged in the act of remembering (Cross, Peck 2010: 127). In order to collect material in the field, I made sound recordings, shot video and took photographs. I also digitalized a couple of Hi8 cassettes I found in the archive to see if I could compare the new footage with something from my childhood. I collected this new material as a referencing technique to accompany my notes but also to be included in my film project as a continuation of the archive by providing an audiovisual representation of my findings. This felt crucial as domestic violence is not a trauma that remains in the past, or an experience that concludes with growing up and leaving home, it is something we carry with us into our adult lives (Alonso Rey 2016: 102). I also revisited some of the places from the photos where I had grown up to see if I could access forgotten memories by simply being in them again (Üllen 2016: 76). This included a childhood home where many of my memories were situated and was instrumental in my data collection of sensory information. A sensory methodology is a nuanced and compassionate approach for conducting research on a topic as delicate as childhood trauma. It allows for the deconstruction of complex thoughts and emotions, giving space to non-verbal experiences of memory, which transcend linear logic and are felt in our imaginations and bodies (Weiser 2010: 3).



The archive



F1 on a Sunday (Between 1992-1999)

I interviewed Photo Therapist and Psychologist, Judy Weiser for my research and asked her how domestic violence in childhood would impact photo analysis. She referred me to her book in which she analysed her own family album and shared her findings:

I made discoveries about the origins of some of my leftover feelings and learned quite a bit about my parents as vulnerable, emotional, human beings, apart from their roles as my mother and father. I also encountered some unfinished business, unresolved issues, emotional “hooks” and uncommunicated needs that should have been dealt with long ago (Weiser 1999: 323).

I had asked myself over the course of my research if I would learn new things about my childhood through the work or if I would simply create a theoretical awareness around it. The reality for me, was that both were true. I confirmed that the photos allowed me to take a step back from my memories and see them in a broader context, but I did not expect the sensory component to allow me to re-experience my childhood so viscerally, almost as though I had learned to go beyond recalling familiar memories to a state in which I could revisit them with far better clarity. I wanted to know what Judy felt was therapeutic about analysing the family album and how the technique is applied. Could she describe what an improvement in well-being might consist of, or how we could begin to quantify it? She said:

Going back to review your past to become freed from the power it still has over you by understanding the past better...it's gonna give you more knowledge about how those experiences affected who you are now and you're learning how to unhook from their power over you, you can't do that if you don't go back there and look at it through fresh eyes, you're a different age you're looking back now. [Regarding abuse], the victim has been made to feel like it's their fault...and there must be something wrong with them or daddy wouldn't have done that, they're children, they don't know any other reality than what's inside their home.²

For Judy, the therapeutic benefits of using family photos are embedded in photography by its very form. As though to take a photo in your hands, is also physically taking agency over the effects that the embedded memory has over you. It is empowering to be able to contextualise an image and consider its individual components, materialising the distance that can be created between the self and a past trauma. Dissected and taken apart, its harm is lessened.



Siblings on a sofa (1987)

² Interview with Judy Weiser, carried out on Zoom, in 2022.



At the beach (1988)

The boy with the pigeon

One day while going through the archive I come across hundred of slides from my paternal granddad's photo collection. He, like my dad was a talented photographer but I had never seen his photos until this research. I lean my face into the viewfinder and pause. I am taken aback by the composition, the tenderness of the moment captured. I notice the shape of his smile, the sweetness of his gaze, I can recognise numerous features that my brothers also have in common. Handsomely dressed, crouched as he smiles at the pigeon sitting on his hand, is my dad— I suppose no older than twelve. There is something so pure in his face that I am almost moved to tears as I see a boy I know so well but also don't recognise. This is not my dad, I think, this is who he really was deep down; a pure, kind hearted boy— but then he grew up and became something else. I think about the horrible nights he must have experienced; the violence and bullying, feeling helpless, angry and scared. I feel so much pity for this young boy who has no idea that he will become like his father. This idea is clearly my imagination creating a dense and tactile experience, enabling for a connection that is purely my perception, but it feels very real (Rodaway 1994: 54). I realise that by feeling sorry for this boy who could have had a different childhood, I am also feeling sorry for myself and my siblings for the same reason.



The boy with the pigeon (London 1965?)

I realize that through this photo, I've transcended my family album, my childhood and entered my dad's. It feels revelational, and I am astonished by the power of the images. I feel a wider connection to the archive, I am one part of a much bigger album. I'm disappointed that my dad wasn't able to break the cycle of violence, but it has given my memories some perspective, like there's more air between them. It does not undo the trauma, but I can look at it now, feel it and not be overwhelmed by it.

Autoethnography in conjunction with memory work, is a freeing methodology, which «gives up any illusion of producing an unmediated mirroring of reality. Instead, it acknowledges that all attempts to speak for, write about, or represent human lives are partial, situated, and mediated» (Bochner, Ellis, 2016: 239). To be able to consider our experiences as both intimate and actual, while at the same time positioning them in the wider fabric of our histories creates distance between ourselves and our traumatic memories, therefore making a space where healing can begin to occur.

Domestic violence is a widespread societal issue that goes beyond a private experience, by sharing these narratives there is the possibility to create community and empower those who have not been represented in the past. Through therapeutic photography, artists and scholars have demonstrated that working with the family album can be a cathartic practice which confronts trauma proactively. Photo elicitation techniques (Harper 2002) demonstrate a deeper understanding of a person's phenomenological experiences that extend beyond what verbal communication alone is able to do. Harper writes that «Photographs can jolt subjects into a new awareness of their social existence. As someone considers this new framing of taken-for-granted experiences they are able to deconstruct their own phenomenological assumptions» (2002: 21). Family photos function far beyond a private collection of images of the past. They are non-static containers for lived realities that can be used to explore how we understand ourselves and others.

References

- Bochner, A., Ellis, C. 2016. *Evocative Autoethnography. Writing Lives and Telling Stories*. New York. Routledge.
- Cross, K. 2015. The Lost of Found Photography. *Photographies*, 8: 43-62.
- Cross, K., Peck, J. 2010. Editorial: Special Issue on Photography, Archive and Memory. *Photographies*, 3: 127-138.
- Edwards, E., Hart, J. (eds.). 2005. *Photographs Object Histories. On the materiality of images*, New York. Routledge.
- Harper, D. 2002. Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies*, 17: 13-26.
- Langford, M. 2001. *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*. Montreal. McGill - Queens University Press.
- Metta, M. 2013. «Putting the body on the Line: Embodied Writing and Recovery through Domestic Violence», in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Jones, H. S., Adams, T.E., Ellis, C. (eds.). New York. Routledge.
- Palmberger, M., Tošić, J. (eds.) 2016. *Memories on the Move: Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past*. Basingstoke. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pedri, N. 2018. Traumatic Layerings of Self: Scrapbooking Personal Photographs in *One Hundred Demons*. *Polysèmes. Revue d'études intertextuelles et intermédiaires*, 19. Risorsa online: <http://journals.openedition.org/polysesemes/3460>
- Sandbye, M. 2014. Looking at the family photo album: a resumed theoretical discussion of why and how. *Journal of Aesthetic & Culture*, 6 (1).
- Weiser, J. 1999. *Phototherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*. Vancouver. PhotoTherapy Centre Press.
- Weiser, J. 2010. Using Personal Snapshots and Family Photographs as Therapy Tools: The “Why, What, and How” of Photo Therapy Techniques. *Psicoart. Rivista di Arte e Psicologia*, 1. Risorsa online: <http://psicoart.cib.unibo.it>
- Winnicott, D. W. 1953. Transitional objects and transitional phenomena; a study of the first not-me possession. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 34: 89-97.

