



Multidisciplinary research to support  
work-life balance for mobile workers  
in the digital age

# Mobile Working and Digital Glimpses into Family Life

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# Family Rituals 2.0 – project aim



“Family Rituals 2.0 seeks to understand individuals’ values held in everyday rituals and the situated social context of mobile workers, and how digital technologies might be used to support inclusion in these rituals for those who are away from home.”

# Today's focus

- 1) Technological affordances
- 2) The concept of glimpsing into home
- 3) Implications

# Methodological Overview

- Qualitative interviews with mobile workers and their families
  - **22** mobile worker interviews
  - **12** follow-up family interviews
- Three themes
  1. the **types of communications** deployed
  2. the **experience of connecting** home for both mobile workers and their families
  3. the **opportunities** and **limitations** of digital technologies in **affording at-a-distance relationships**

# The starting point ....

- **Co-presence v. Virtual presence**
  - Substitution of work related trips (sustainability)
- **Co-presence = richness of being there**
  - **Communication (verbal and non-verbal)**
  - **Tacit knowledge**
  - **Emotion**
  - **Sensory**
- **So, how can technology substitute for face-to-face interaction in a family context?**

# Co-present Family Activities

- **Prosaic rituals and routines**
- Example: Food and drink
  - Being together
    - Spending time shopping for ingredients
    - Spending time at home over dinner/drinking
    - Going out together for food/drink
  - Working as a team or creating together
    - Sharing cooking and associated tasks
    - Talking and preparing

# Virtually together

- Fewer examples of synchronised ‘hanging out’
- Type of absence and family context

I don't see the need to sort of sit there in silence on a laptop just on the off chance that we've got something to say to each other, yes. (Freddy, MW interview )

# Virtually together

‘our classic example of FaceTime was sitting in a hotel in Shanghai in 2012 watching the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics; sitting on my bed, with my wife and son sitting on this sofa [at home] *watching it together and chatting, as if we were all in the same room*’ (Max MW14, researcher’s emphasis)

# Virtual parenting

“Give you an example of the fact he injured his finger a few weeks ago and you know it has been really interesting during FaceTime with him over the last four or five weeks because actually he can put his finger right up to the camera, and you know you can see quite a lot of gruesome detail how in fact actually the recovery of the finger is going. And you know, and I think that is, it’s obviously an instinctive thing, he knows where the camera is, he knows what to do with it. I think he lost a tooth about 18 months ago and you know I got, fascinating insight into the inside of his mouth as the result of him using zoom technology.” (Ursula, MW interview )

# Virtual tourists

“And I always show Arthur my hotel room, which somehow I suppose does help me as well. You know? It’s like, here’s the bed and here’s the door and here’s the bathroom and for me it feels like I’m not alone... Of course I am alone! But somehow that always makes me feel better. And Arthur’s coming out to London on Friday next week, and we’re staying in the hotel that I stay in, and that will be brilliant because then he’ll have stayed there and seen it properly, as well as sort of having had that remote connection.”

# Glimpsing into home

- Synchronous
  - Phone/skype/facetime calls for
    - Saying hello
    - Catching up on news
    - Parenting at a distance

‘if I’m in Asia, my son gets up early and he sits here with his iPad, so I know he’ll be on it. I just dial and sometimes he says “hi what are you doing?” He tells me a joke or something and that’s it you know two seconds and it’s gone.’ (Max MW14)

# Parenting together apart

“I really like it when [mobile worker]’s away – even if it’s just kind of a snatched two minutes where he’s been in meetings, he’s gone back to his hotel room, he’s got a little bit of time before he goes out and meets colleagues again for drinks and dinner or whatever it is that he’s doing – even in that short space of time I really like the fact that we’re able to chat on speaker phone whether it’s in the car or in the nursery have all four of us able to talk to all four of us, for me that’s really important and I really like that. (...) I do feel that we’ve all kind of just come back and touched base even though, you know one of us is away, for me, and maybe that says more about me than the technology, that’s important.” (Female (partner) – Family interview–)

# Glimpsing into home

- Asynchronous
  - Snapchat
    - baby pictures
  - Text
    - Checking in
    - gossip/comments
  - Email ‘letter’

# Moments in time

‘Like Snapchats me a little cool thing of making [son] smile, or snoring, or when he’s sleeping he’s doing some giggles in his sleep; so she Snapchats it to me, which is kind of cool. It’s nice, it’s just like a little snippet, it makes me go: “oh I want to be there”, but also it’s kind of without going through the whole thing of "let’s go on Skype and then holding the phone up". And just like a little kind of snapshot of my life. My normal life at home I suppose.’

Mobile worker interview

# Limitations

- Some activities need the physical presence of the significant other
  - Dancing, playing tennis
  - Physical intimacy
- Emotions constrained
- Full stories not always shared
- Absence felt even more
- Synchronisation and the right time

# Not being there together

“Going to X location to watch football with A and B... It is quite mundane and everyday but it’s those things that I miss a lot. And we don’t do hugely exciting stuff, we are not into mountain bike riding or hand gliding or anything – yachting or anything like that, we don’t do that sort of thing. But it is that ‘everydayness’ of walking round a supermarket together and having a laugh about what’s on the shelves. It is really that simple.” (Male (worker) – Mobile worker interview)

# Virtual hugs?

“.....You know it is that tactile side of things. Sometimes all kids really need is a big hug you know and a whisper in the ear and sort of, you know, something tangible, the communication and... I can't do anything that is physical you know what I mean so I can't go and make [husband] a cup of coffee or I can't make something for him or I can't do something for him which is all communicating because by doing something for somebody you re communicating either anger, love, hate, you know compassion. So I can't do that. Physically can't go and give somebody a hug.” (Brenda, MW interview)

# Emotion and the non verbal

“I think the reality is when we converse normally face to face, I can tell him to shut up or... or just walk off if it’s getting boring – and [mobile worker] can do the same. Obviously you can’t do that on the phone, so all of those body language things don’t work.” Partner, family interview

# Heightened distance

“Sometimes I am not sure that Skype helps with [daughter]. (...) Because I think when she actually sees me it makes her miss me more. (...) And I think sometimes she prefers texting because if she hears my voice she also gets, sometimes, unless she’s in a really high mood – that can make her miss me a bit more as well. So it is funny, although there’s a more personal form of communication it depends on who you are communicating with as to whether they are suitable or not.”  
(Female (worker) Mobile worker interview)

# Implications for work and family

- Technology
  - enables workers to maintain family relationships at distance
  - distance ‘care’ remains responsibility of mobile workers but often difficult
- Life is squeezed into absence with work
  - Less full participation through virtual presence
  - More likely to be ‘glimpsing in’

# Implication questions

- Does it make work related travel
  - Feasible?
  - Reduce gender barriers?
  - Sustainable over time?
- What are the implications for reducing work related travel?
- What is the role and responsibility of employers?
- Can technology do more?

# Conclusions

- Communication is facilitated through a range of digital technologies
  - Synchronous/asynchronous
- People communicate whilst away for a number of reasons
  - Demonstration of **belonging whilst absent**
  - **Sharing** of experiences and care
- Technology affords **'glimpses'** of home life/routine
- More expressive communication appears to help improve work/life balance
- *However...*
  - Never a full representation
  - Sometimes positive
  - Sometimes dissatisfactory
- Something to consider is the unknown future trajectories of:-
  - work related travel
  - Appropriation of technology
  - New technology (e.g. virtual reality)

# Team partners

With particular thanks to **Dr Billy Clayton** (UWE), and **Dr Marina Marouda** and **Professor Adele Ladkin** (Bournemouth), who partnered in the collection and analysis of the data presented here.



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