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Doing intimate family work through ICTs in the time of networked individualism

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, family intimacy has been seen as depending on spatial proximity and physical closeness. However, due to individualization and globalization, many families live apart and/or spend their days away from each other. Moreover, a shift in family communication from household-to-household to person-to-person has occurred in the context of so-called networked individualism. These changes make it imperative to investigate how contemporary families communicate to create and maintain intimacy in and across households. Drawing on the concept of *doing intimate family work*, this study investigates the small acts performed in everyday life to do family intimacy through ICT in the context of networked individualism. We conducted interviews with 6 multigenerational families – spread across 18 households in Sweden and the US. Results show how responsibilities and practices of family communication become part of *doing intimate family work*, through personalized technology, with consequences for each individual family member. We explore the various affordances family members realize through actions in order to support family intimacy and how these practices reinforce the importance of the family home as a physical base for cross-household family communication.

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Introduction

As a sociological category, intimacy is fairly young (Smart, 2006, p. 308). Previously, it was often subsumed into discussions of private and public spheres and in relation to family, romantic love, and marriage, usually from a heteronormative perspective (cf. Luhmann, 1986). Intimacy was seen as depending and thriving on physical proximity (cf. Meßmer et al., 2014). In this view, family intimacy comes ‘automatically’ because family members spend time being physically close. However, today’s modern living conditions and increased secondary education in many parts of the world often mean that families spend their days apart (Christensen, 2009) and live spread out geographically (e.g. Chudnovskaya & Kolk, 2017). Under these circumstances, family intimacy is no longer necessarily depending on physical closeness (Berlant, 1998), and communication

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technologies increasingly have become pervasive for managing and maintaining intimate relations (Mok et al., 2010; Velarde Hermida & Casas-Mas, 2020), such as extended family (Hänninen et al., 2021).

Concurrently, a new communication pattern in the wake of social and technological change has been identified. Barry Wellman analysed a shift away from group centred, physically located communication towards *networked individualism* (Wellman, 2001). A move from tightly knit communities, like households, as the base for communication towards networked individuals. Meaning that 'it is the person who is the focus: not the family, not the work unit, not the neighbourhood, and not the social group' (Rainie & Wellman, 2014, p. 6). That means that groups or communities are made up of more detached and fragmented networks of individuals. In other words, it was more common that families communicated from household-to-household – for example, having a shared landline that anyone could answer, or holiday greetings sent to a family from a family by a designated family member, most often the mother (Di Leonardo, 1987). These communication strategies are increasingly transforming, being replaced by more individualized communication patterns and technologies such as the mobile phone. Key is that individuals are now the centre of their networks and that mobile ICTs have further intensified the disconnection of communication between specific locations, as people can be reached anywhere, at any time.

Even though, as Rainie and Wellman (2014), as well as Castells (2002), have argued, this change started before the advent of the internet, processes of digitalization act as accelerators and fortify this social trend. That does not mean that the family per se is at risk, but that its communicative practices are changing. In other words, while in the past a family more often acted as one communicative unit, today adults and young family members are carrying their own personal communicative tool – the mobile phone – in their pocket and are increasingly responsible for managing their own family relationships (Sadowski & Eklund, 2021a). Against this backdrop of understanding internet and communication technologies (ICTs) as a means to create and maintain family intimacy on the one hand and the individualizing tendencies in communication on the other, it is imperative to investigate how family intimacy is supported through the use of contemporary communication technology.

In this study, we explore how various ICTs, constituting a poly-media landscape of multiple communication opportunities to pick and choose from (Madianou & Miller, 2013), are employed to *do intimate family work* (Sadowski & Eklund, 2021a). We draw on doing family as Michaela Schier and Jurczyk (2008) defined it. 'Doing family' for them entails practical and symbolic acts that constitute the family as a cohesive group, shape the family's self-definition, and help families to enact being a family. Secondly, we draw on DiLeonardo's notion of 'kinwork' (1987), which describes the particular everyday tasks that are employed to sustain family intimacy, such as remembering relatives' birthdays, sending holiday cards, and telephoning regularly. Kinwork was traditionally assigned to women, and DiLeonardo (1987) emphasizes how this kind of work has habitually been undervalued or rendered invisible. Doing intimate family work, in our context, means performing finely tuned individual social actions and interactions, specifically those aiming to maintain family intimacy cross households through communicative means. Intimacy is here seen as an inward looking, shared story of familiarity and comfort (Berlant, 1998) yet volatile, subjective, and unique. We here thus understand

a wide range of actions as intimate family work, ranging from gestures to conversations to rituals, to forms of communication, actively aiming at a sense of shared familiarity, of maintaining relational bonds. Our primary focus is thus not intimacy between those family members sharing a household, although in practice, cross-household communication is also managed within individual households.

Family is here seen as something done through active practices (see Morgan, 2011) rather than a given, static entity. It is not limited to the classical Western ideal of the nuclear family, but rather encompass a larger group of kin from several generations; as this is how our informants choose to define family in their everyday lives. We thus look at family communication as a whole. In order to do so, we look at the *affordances* for intimacy, or opportunities for action, that emerge in the use of ICT, as families attempt to create and maintain a sense of family. While we are aware that active processes to manage and maintain family communication and intimacy exist in a tension fields with needs for individual privacy, this is not the main focus of the study. We explore how family members try to overcome distances (Sadowski & Eklund, 2021a) with the help of ICTs and support intimacy between household and across generations. However, this involves processes of both inclusion and exclusion of various family members in various complicated networks of communication. Intimacy and privacy are thus linked concepts.

This study asks: What are the opportunities for action ICTs offer for cross-household family intimacy in the context of networked individualism? How do our studied families engage ICTs to do intimate family work? To answer these questions, we conducted at-home interviews about family communication and ICT use with members of 6 extended, multigenerational Swedish families, spread across 18 households in both Sweden and the US.

Our results highlight four main affordances of contemporary ICTs for intimate family work: availability, synchronization and asynchronization, scale, and visual interaction. We discuss how these are drawn on in specific ways in the doing of intimate family work and how this is happening in a context where each family member has become a networked individual. This study argues that how family intimacy is done is affected by networked individualism, which in this context means that there is an increasing, individual responsibility of each family member to use the affordances of personal technologies such as smartphones to create and maintain family communication and thus familiarity and intimacy. However, we also show how certain communication practices mean that we must rethink the disconnection of space and communication which the mobile phone promised, as in our data various family members use ICTs to reinforce a sharing of the physical home.

Everyday family life and ICTs

Benkler (2006) has suggested that there are two main developments in the context of internet and communication technology (ICTs) for relationships: the strengthening of pre-existing relations with family, friends, and other strong ties, and the emergence of many loose relationships with weaker ties, as in virtual communities (see Rheingold, 1993). Indeed, ICTs offer opportunities for regular contact, but when it comes to the quality of that interaction and the impact it has on intimacy, research has been tied up in a tug of war between the idea that digitalization gives families more time and

opportunities to connect during the day (Broadbent, 2016) and the idea that social interactions are becoming too fluid and superficial to be able to support meaningful relationships (Rosa, 2013).

Famously, in her book *Alone together* (2012), Sherry Turkle worried that: ‘when technology engineers intimacy, relationships can be reduced to mere connections. And then, the easy connection becomes redefined as intimacy. Put otherwise, cyberintimacies slide into cybersolitudes’ (p. 16). While she is not focusing *per se* on family intimacy, she nevertheless discusses how the ‘absent while present’ paradigm can affect family bonds. For example, she is drawing on US interview data in which a young woman describes video chat sessions with her grandmother in which she is secretly writing emails on the side and thus not paying full attention to the grandmother. Here, Turkle concludes that the women are *alone together* (Turkle, 2012, pp. 13–14).

From another point of view, Wajcman et al. (2007) argue that awareness of the constant possibility of communication creates an enhanced sense of connection and intimacy. In the context of distributed family life, where family members spend their days apart during work, school, and leisure time and consume media via individualized channels and technologies, ICTs can be put to use to create a sense of presence amongst family members (see also Christensen, 2009). Small, mundane acts intensify a sense of connected presence (Licoppe, 2004), such as using mobile phones for telling a family member to buy milk on their way home. Not only does this micro-coordination show intimacy through a sense of linked lives, but it also constitutes intimacy in this way (Wajcman et al., 2007, p. 636).

When it comes to intergenerational, extended family communication, most research has focused on transnational families, where one or several family members, often mothers, migrate to the global North for work (Kang, 2012; Madianou & Miller, 2013; Parreñas, 2005). In these studies, it has been shown how ICTs can work to keep families together across great distances and how new practices of, for example, parenting come into being (Kang, 2012; Parreñas, 2005). Yet, we know less about the effects of ICTs on Western families (Hänninen et al., 2021; Share et al., 2018), who are not forced to live in different countries for economic reasons and who do not maintain economic responsibilities in their home countries.

Much research has focussed on how families do family communication and family work by showing their relationship *publicly*. For example, siblings indicate their relatedness by adding their brothers or sisters as such on *Facebook*. Others use *display* as a form of marking and making families, for example, by posting and sharing family photos (Finch, 2007; Lambert, 2015). Particularly, what today is often called *sharenting* has become an issue of debate, bringing forward the discussions if it is ethical to post photos on your children online without consent (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Mascheroni et al., 2018). However, the present study is not concerned with publicly making family, in the sense that we do not focus on how public display is used in order to show family relations to the world, or at least (extended) social media networks. As we are focusing on intimacy, we are rather concerned with *internal* family communication with the help of ICTs and social networking services – a topic that, to our knowledge, has less frequently been researched.

We know that families reside in a poly-media landscape; it is not about single platforms or technologies, but how these meshes together into an entire landscape of ICTs

(Madianou & Miller, 2013), and that ICTs have become important for the contact between family members within households, yet less how this works between household. At the same time, digital technologies such as mobile phones are inherently individualizing, with each individual being the centre of their own communicative network. Mobile ICT has furthermore disconnected communication from specific locations, freeing family members to communicate wherever they are. Thus, in the context of networked individualism, what does this mean for family intimacy and communication?

Utilizing affordances to do intimate family work through ICTs

Throughout her work, Nancy Baym finds that when it comes to close relationships, media use and face-to-face time correlate positively; people who interact a great deal physically do so online as well, and vice versa (2015). However, she argues that:

[R]elationships are built and sustained through many media – including face-to-face communication – that offer an enormous range of affordances and fit together into a unified if complicated system. Deciding which to use when can be a loaded choice; media send hints of relational significance that may or may not be intended. Media use is influenced by many factors. It is ever more important for relational partners to find normative behaviors and moral orders for technology use upon which they can agree. (2015, p. 168)

In other words, using different media in intimate family contexts requires different forms of work in order to maintain ‘a unified if complicated system’ (2015). We argue that the ICT use of multigenerational, Swedish families, working on family intimacy within and across households, is one such complicated system. We depart from Baym’s finding that choices on which ICT channels to use for communication with whom, and in which contexts, are meaningful and it is exactly these normative behaviours and moral orders for technology use which we still do not know much about, and particularly not in the context of family and kin life. For this purpose, we are zooming in on the affordances that emerge in the interactions of family members and digital devices. These affordances, or perceived ranges of possible use, are crucial for *doing intimate family work*.

Gibson (1979) coined the term affordance to describe how living beings use opportunities for action that they perceive in the environment. A chair, for example, does not own an inherent ‘sitability’. It is our interpretation, physical bodies, context, and knowledge that makes us sit on it. In other contexts, it could be a nightstand, a makeshift ladder – or excellent firewood. Departing from this original meaning, affordance today is often used in studies of technology, digital media, and communication (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Here, it stands for the perceived opportunities and potentialities that technological contexts contain for action. Importantly, affordance entails a relationship between the artefact and human perception, meaning that how an object or environment is used is not predetermined or imminent but comes to be in interaction, a relational process.

Affordances are useful for analysing communication because they offer a middle way for thinking about how technologies are socially constructed on the one hand and materially constraining on the other. In this way, as Hutchby (2001) has pointed out, affordances allow moving beyond technological determinism and pure social constructivism. For us, affordances are not strictly technological features, existing irrespective of use, but are social, negotiated, and realised in interaction, and thereby

shape and co-create social life. We thus pay attention to the relationality of our social world (Emirbayer, 1997), while still acknowledging that technology and communicative media offer a structure which both limits and offers opportunity for action. Technology has a shape, and this shape matters but it is not deterministic; people have agency and make choices in use based on preferences and norms. Meaning is not fixed but rather context-dependent. Thus, in this study, we focus on how ICTs shape social interaction but also how family members actively use, reuse, and appropriate ICTs to make them fit their lives and desires.

Material and method

Sweden is a highly connected and technologically affine country (Bilbao-Osorio et al., 2013). About 91% of the population aged 12 and up have internet access at home and 85% own a smartphone (Findahl, 2017). Eight out of 10 two-year-olds have internet access in some way. Two out of three users make phone calls over the internet, 74% use Facebook, and 29% Whatsapp (Findahl, 2017). Concurrently, Sweden and other Scandinavian countries are often considered forerunners when it comes to demographic changes (e.g. changes in divorce rates or child-rearing practices, Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020). Swedish family structure is typically characterized by a dual-earner, separate taxation system, with a high acceptance of alternative family forms such as cohabitation without marriage and relatively equal parenting opportunities for (separated) mothers and fathers (Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020). A strong state supports individuals in their self-fulfillment projects by providing, for example, social insurance, elder care, state-sponsored pre-school, and free education; thereby freeing individuals from many traditional family obligations. This makes Swedish families a suitable candidate for our research: they have a pioneering role in indicating broader, societal changes in family structures and show early and high adoption rates of digital technologies.

We conducted interviews in line with six extended Swedish families, spread across 18 households with family members of different generations. We reached interview informants via community representatives. The study was advertised as concerning family communication and as interested in all types and sizes of family. Our only requirement for participation was that more than one generation would be interested in taking part. We used stratified quota sampling (Kothari, 2004) with three predefined sampling locations: Swedish countryside, one of Sweden's bigger cities, and a big city on the United States west coast (with emigrated Swedish families). The US West-coast was chosen as it, due to the IT industry, hosts a large number of Swedish migrated families. Of the US families, their extended families were located both in Sweden and in the US at the time of the interviews. The goal was not to compare but to gain contested views and analytical depth by widening the range of informants.

Interviews took place individually or in groups, depending on informants' preferences, and were conducted in Swedish. Most interviews were set in informant' homes in Sweden or the United States, but a few also at workplaces during lunch and via Skype. All interviews were held as in-depth, open structure interviews (Hayes, 2000) consisting of broad questions about family communication. As family communication can be a subject on which few have spent time thinking, we also asked informants to explain how family members congratulate each other on birthdays as one concrete

example. A complimentary survey was handed out for an extended interview situation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), in order to collect information about technology habits and demographics.

The sample contains 40 people (aged 1–86) who identify themselves as Swedish (irrespective of place of birth or current country of residence) and who spoke Swedish at home: 28 persons, were officially contacted and agreed to be interviewed, but in addition, eleven children were present during the interviews, offering opinions, talking to their parents or the interviewer. One older man with Alzheimer's disease was present during one interview but did not take part. Of our adult informants, around 60% had a university degree or equivalent. Most were working or retired, two women and one man were on parental leave, and one woman was a homemaker. Their professions were as diverse as a fast-food restaurant employee, lumber size controller, architect, and biomedicine analyst. All adults and children over the age of twelve had a mobile phone; only six not smartphones. Everyone had access to the internet at home, although one retired couple was unaware of this fact – they owned a tablet that their children had connected to the internet.

For our analysis, we transcribed the interviews *in verbatim* and compiled the surveys, then compared them for a first understanding of the sample. Initially, the theory was 'put in brackets' to focus on the informant's everyday understanding (see Aspers, 2009). In other words, in a first analytical step, we studied the life-world of the informants as they described it, using their own words. The dataset was then extensively and manually coded with an inductive approach using a qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 11). Coding focused on a wide variety of categories, initially defined in discussions but added to in the course of the coding phase: e.g. types of communication technology (e.g. SMS), relationships (e.g. siblings), family rituals (e.g. holidays), relationship to ICTs (e.g. frustration) *et cetera* with 59 coding categories and almost 2000 coded sections. Drawing on (1) the everyday understanding of the data from the perspective of the informants, (2) the inductive coding and (3) the theoretical concept of doing intimate family work (Sadowski & Eklund, 2021a), we refined and abstracted what these families do when they draw on ICTs for family contacts. The result section below is structured according to the final affordances that emerged in this process.

Results: affordances of doing intimate family work

Woman.City.27: My family really means a lot to me, (...) that you are supposed to be there, that it is important to be in touch, it is important that you meet, and it is important that you help each other [edited for clarity].

Family intimacy for our studied sample was made, as in the quote above, through regular contacts via ICTs, physical meetings, and in various ways being there for each other. Physical meetings were central for intimacy creation and what family valued most, in particular for ritualized events. However, those are not our focus here, and the role of rituals such as birthdays for family intimacy is well documented elsewhere (e.g. Wolin & Bennett, 1984). In all families, almost all members lived somewhat spread out in different cities or countries. Education or job opportunities, but also a desire for self-reliance made people move. Self-reliance from family, made possible by a well-developed public sector is characteristic of Swedish individualism (Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020). Care

obligations was thus no real hinder for movement in our sample. For the mundane acts of communication occurring on an everyday basis, doing intimate family work relied heavily on ICTs, both within and across households. We here detail four affordances that play a significant role in doing so.

Negotiating scale and group membership

Woman.Country.30: I use my phone, a lot, sure, iPhone addiction. (...) I talk a lot on the phone, some WhatsApp, it is for the social, very seldom for work. I have a few workgroups if you get what I mean but those are more for social reasons. There is some work-related question but they are mostly for private and social things with work. And I have WhatsApp groups with friends and my family as well, my core family I mean. Mother, father, sister, and brother.

In this quote, we see a mother on parental leave talking about the different tools she uses, and the various ways she changes the scale, by having larger or smaller groups and using tools that are made for conversations in group or one-to-one. As can be seen in the quote, personal technology allows for scaling group size in family intimacy work as different platforms allow various degrees of privacy as well as group size. In this way, scalability becomes a crucial tool in a paradigm of networked individualism as it is the individual who moves in and out of various family groups and constellations. We see how the woman is drawing on different support networks in different contexts and situations. This becomes an affordance for doing intimate family work as an active process of drawing lines of who belongs to the intimate sphere of the family and who does not. In the quote below, we see how also social media networks, such as Facebook, can become a way of doing intimate family work for those not belonging to the household or extended family. The low cost of using Facebook makes it suitable for 'keeping in the loop'.

Man.Country.45: I have half-siblings ... and I would not know as much about them without Facebook because they are probably not someone I would phone or at least not phone often and now you can see their posts on Facebook and reply to those if you want, so that strengthen those contacts that would otherwise have been very shallow.

Changing the scale and group belongings to support family intimacy means both using a multitude of tools, from simply phoning one person to posting on Facebook, where the extended family will be privy to everyday happenings in one's life, to changes in scale with the help of applications, such as having multiple groups on WhatsApp. Due to the nature of personal devices and accounts, each individual decides the scale as they post or message their family. Constant work goes into deciding who belongs into which group, for example, who belongs to the most intimate group, as in the first quote above where the woman refers to her 'core family' which incidentally is not her new family with husband and child but the family she grew up in, or who belongs to the extended family as in the second quote, *et cetera*. Family members engage in constant micro-politics of deciding to whom to send what and what filters to apply to each message. In this way, everyone makes individual decisions on who is part of the specific configuration of their own family, and for every single family member, this is a contextual decision. *We have one of those WhatsApp groups for the family and there are probably ten different groups with different constellations [of members]*

(Man.City.35) As we talked to several family members in each extended family, we could see how these constellations of groups overlapped or extended as everyone's personal definition of family varied; due to the fact that they were each the centre of their individual network. Scale becomes a way of defining family, and we see these overlapping layers of intimacy as family members, as individuals are part – or not part of – family constellations.

The synchronicity and asynchronicity of ICTs and family work

A key component of synchronization is that ICTs allows for both immediacies and delayed responses.

Woman.City.73: I think that SMS is good, really great. Better than to call, just because SMS you can read when you [want] yourself and answer when you think yourself that you have the time and the opportunity. [...] I do not do it in this way that I call without having sent an SMS and say that I want to talk, 'call when you have the opportunity', because I know how it is, that you never get it right when you just call, especially to families with children.

As this retired woman explains, combining text messages with phoning was a means to mediate the ever-present nature of personal technology. To avoid disturbing and negotiate around family members' varying needs by accounting for life-stages, particularly the difference in available time when one has small children at home, asynchronicity was drawn upon. With the mobile phone, there is no way of knowing where an individual might be or what they might be doing when they are called as mobile phones in this way disconnect family communication from the home. That people had their phones on and in reach was almost universally assumed across the sample, and we return to this in the next section. Intimacy was supported through attempting to promote quality communication, and reflection on the ever-present individual communication devices. This was particularly important for our families with member both in Sweden and the U.S.

Man.US.46: My little sister sometimes when she calls, 'Oh is it 3 PM for you?' so *laugh* it is hard when there is so little overlap when you can call (...) so I think it became easier to get them to write when they could start messaging and Facebooking.

In the quote, this man talked about how much easier communication with Sweden had become since social media allowed for more asynchronous interaction. The opportunity for asynchronous communication supported intimacy as text and image messages could be sent and answered when family members were awake at different times. Immediacy becomes an option that can be switched on or off on demand as people can trust that others will keep their phone under observation and at hand when not busy or sleeping.

Negotiating availability

Man.Country.25: It is easier if I am contacted than if I try to contact others. Because I consider myself more flexible than most people that I need to contact because they sit with this and this and this. Because I, with my work, have very set hours, like now it is a break, now it is home and so on. So it is easier to contact me, than me taking a chance that they are available. And here Facebook messenger is important, often I write there and then they answer when they can. Even if it is a bit late, I have tried at least.

In this quote, we see how several of our affordances come together: being available and synchronizability across different schedules when the young man draws on both direct and indirect communication tools. In the interview, we further explored how he balanced being available to maintain a relationship with his mother while making sure he kept enough distance to establish his independence. Being available became this young man's way of doing intimate family work while coming-of-age in a new city. Those kinds of availability – many parallel channels and individualized connection – were a key communicative affordance for doing intimate family work. While in our families issues of control over children's ICT use was a key issue (Sadowski & Eklund, 2021b), as well as youths attempting to maintain independency, we find it outside the scope of our exploration of intimacy. However, we see in the above example how closeness and distance are negotiated in the young man's use of ICT for family communication.

Personal, digital devices, particularly smartphones, evoke expectations of availability to have phones turned on and within reach. However, being available was constantly negotiated. Like the young man above, many of our interviewees expressed heightened awareness about the responsibility to be available and described a balancing act to find boundaries with personal technologies and individual, omnipresent digital devices. The landline phone, for those few who still had one, was distinctly un-personal, and there was much less pressure to answer it due to this. Moreover, a general shift to phoning individual people made landlines less relevant as a form of technology, as in the quote below:

Woman.City.41: We have a landline number, but no phone plugged in (...) and now it is like you phone a particular person [Man.City.43: *mm*] there is one person you want to get hold of, so you phone them.

Disconnection, as in consciously choosing to be unavailable from family members, was not seen as a viable option, precisely due to demands for intimacy by family members:

Woman.City.27: No, but I think that I expect myself to answer, and if I don't, then I need to have an explanation. [...] 'Sorry for the late reply', I mean you can't write that to your friends or family.

Availability in digitized family contexts becomes a type of work: this young woman felt she had to justify or legitimize not answering when she was contacted via ICTs by her family members in a conscious process of negotiation. Availability did not rest solely in the technologies but in the practices of people (see also Licoppe, 2004) as they negotiate connection and disconnection but was at the same time shaped by the affordances of personal communication technologies.

Particularly, for children who were not yet users, this sometimes meant being left out. For example, the lack of a home telephone meant relatives wanting to reach the child had to go through an adult, and sometimes this meant that no communication took place. The nature of personal devices meant children occasionally ended up outside the intimate family sphere. On the other hand, boundaries in intimacy, here caused by non-ownership, can provide privacy and independence for children. The question of when intimacy slides into surveillance is outside the scope of this study but an important question nonetheless.

Visual interaction

Woman.US.72: Oh yes, but it is ... you can follow them in a different way and now we can talk to him [on Skype] and he sings to us and plays with us, yes so it's very good.

In this quote, a grandmother in Sweden is talking about interacting with her young grandson living in the United States on Skype. Video chat allowed for playful activities such as peek-a-boo, singing, or showing toys. With the added visuality, the conversations turn more lively and interactive and enabled playing together, as it entailed the opportunity to transfer aspects of embodiment, such as body language, facial expressions, and so on. Something drawn on both in inter- and intra-generational interactions. However, in particular for grandparents, these technologies became crucial for creating intimacy (see also Share et al., 2018) through a feeling of being able to 'follow' grandchildren's as they grew. Even small children could hold the phone or tablet and interact on their own, to some extent, with a grandparent, without the parent acting as a translator. This was experienced as allowing more direct interaction and through this relationship building. Another example were young cousins playing games while talking through video on a second device at the same time. That children could use and engage with various family members though these ICTs was key, as children, as well as adults, were the centre of their own networks and thus engaged in communication to maintain family relations.

Another key way in which visuality of ICT mattered for intimacy was in the context of sharing digital pictures. Sending snapshots from family vacations had to a great extent replaced the classical postcards and afforded quickly informing family members about happenings and creating a feeling of family intimacy. In particular, however, un-staged pictures, shared in closed family settings detailing mundane everyday life were key in doing intimate family work. These pictures would never be shown publicly, but instead, their authentic and private feel was used to create intimacy and as a way of making the everyday tangible to family:

Man. City.35: I experience that WhatsApp is, a bit more than Facebook, that you give a better image ... It has rarely happened that I have posted an image when *younger daughter* is lying on the floor, crying in a puddle [on Facebook]

The image discussed in the quote exemplifies what everyday life might look like for someone on parental leave with two small children. Intimacy is produced by allowing specific others, namely, family, to have a peek into this 'unvarnished truth' of lost control in everyday life. It is precisely this insight into the mundane, into the highs and lows of life, that is reserved for the realm of the intimate: and which thus became a specific way to do intimate family work with those family members you do not share a home with. It stands in opposition to the self-promotional presentation of happy lives many users present on social media (van Dijck, 2013). In other words, intimacy here is created by letting yourself, and your flaws, be seen; intimacy is created through allowing vulnerability.

At the same time, the affordance of visibility was not always beneficial. For example, two grandparents explained that they quit using Skype due to one incidence when baby-sitting their granddaughter.

Woman.City.73: We got a Skype camera from our son, but that had an abrupt end as our daughter-in-law, their daughter, she was sleeping here when she was around three and

saw her mother on the screen and called out for her and was completely inconsolable, so it was not so good right then.

For the small child, the video call reinforced the physical distance to her parent. Visibility of the parent became a hindrance in establishing intimacy and trust to the grandparents. The realized affordance of video depending on the particular user, and context. Finally, video interaction meant opening up conversations.

Woman.US.44: As soon as you have that video call it is no longer a private call and then lots of people become mixed up in the call, (...), if I start then someone comes and takes over, 'Oh you are here' and someone comes and shows something and then they interrupt and you get side-tracked, so they [video calls] fill different functions.

In the example above, we see how video can open up, rather than close in, a conversation, making it a shared event in the home. Taking the video call for a walk was common, showing of home renovations or gardens, or grandparents playing peek-a-boo with a grandchild. These uses transformed individual conversations to include more actors than those who might have called each other. In this way, we see limits to the individualizing trends of ICTs.

Concluding discussion: intimacy, communication, and limitations to networked individualism

Traditionally, communicative family work has often been seen as something done by an individual for the group (Di Leonardo, 1987). In a paradigm of networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2014), our studied family members are all involved in the many mundane, small acts that constitute communicative family work. That does not mean that the careful negotiation of connections and family bonds we have observed is something new. However, widespread ICT use through personal devices brings new dimensions to having to negotiate involvements with or boundaries towards relatives individually. Through affordances made possible by the vast poly-media landscape (Madianou & Miller, 2013), people today are drawing on a variety of strategies in order to create and support family intimacy. As Baym (2015) put it, the choice of which channels to use with whom and in which contexts is indeed a loaded one. These choices lay the foundation for normative behaviours in doing family intimacy with and through ICT.

While scalability has been discussed in the context of social media and the potentially big reach they offer individuals (Miller et al., 2016), scalability in the context of family communication often means to 'scale down' immensely and to be very selective about who is included. Generally, interaction took place between one person and another and the nature of ICTs as linking individual to individual supports the idea of networked individualism. However, in contrast to earlier ICTs, particular contemporary applications better afford small, intimate, and foremost private groups, such as where families created a multitude of intersecting family groups (that would change in particular contexts, for example, when siblings have a group separate from a group where parents are included, etc.). Individuals participated in these groups as individual members, and for each message sent, they negotiated which groups to send it to, deciding on an individual basis who belonged to the family they made that day. This means to constantly engage in

micro-politics of whom to send a message, to ask who belongs in which group, and to consider one's audience. One interviewee, for example, reported that he did not have close contact with step-siblings and mainly caught up with them through checking their Facebook feed. So that means that the stepsiblings were making a conscious decision to not define each other as close, scaled family, but rather as part of a wider, more public network. The boundaries of family in the instance of ICT communication becomes a type of work each person engages in.

We have described how visual interaction in the context of intimate family work differs to how visibility as affordance has often been understood as 'being visible' for others and presenting oneself in the best possible light for one's personal or professional network or followers (van Dijck, 2013). For example, when users present supposedly perfect depictions of their everyday lives on social media. In contrast, video calls and everyday images shared in dedicated family groups open doors into messy and unstaged homes. In an era where outward presentations are public and can be heavily monitored in social media, intimacy is about allowing oneself to be seen, with flaws and everything, by designated eyes only.

The importance placed on joint family communication channels such as Whatsapp, Google groups, *etcetera* highlights that while our family members are engaging in these networks as individuals, they are part of making family as a joint, group venture. Doing intimate family work is comprised of many small acts of communication, both individual-to-individual but also individual-to-group. Through this, a joint sense of family as a collective is created. This is further reinforced as the visuality affordance returns importance to the physical location. In other words, even in networked individualism joint uses (household-to-household) continue to matter as video calls often became doors into people's homes and families. While most individuals indeed seem to operate as the centre of their own network, this does not automatically lead to the loss of the importance of spaces such as households, and in particular to the shared family space of the home. This highlights how ICTs are not stable, and various applications, as well as particular usages, become part of the entirety of a fluid, communicative landscape.

Still, we have illustrated here how personal technologies shape how intimate family work is done, with every family member engaged in constant, personal negotiations. What is clear is how doing intimate family work was individualized, but also how families at the same time engaged in multiple practices supporting a sense of togetherness. Similar to our study, Hänninen et al. (2021) have argued in a study of Finish families that ICTs allow for refamilisation – families living in separate households to reconnect – while at the same time this communication is shaped by networked individualism. In particular, they highlight that contemporary ICTs often allow for one-to-many communication more easily than earlier ICTs which tended to focus on a one-to-one format (Hänninen et al., 2021). However, this does not change the fact that individuals are the centre of their own family networks, which looks different for each member.

In this study, we have looked at how multigenerational families work to create, support, and maintain intimate family bonds through ICTs, within and cross-households. This is becoming increasingly important as, in late modernity, we see a dissolution of tradition and increasing freedom of the individual from the family (Giddens, 1993). We identified four main affordances of contemporary ICTs – visual interaction, synchronicities and asynchronicities, scale, and availability – which are drawn on when doing

family. Family relations are constantly actualized through ICT and the phone becomes an extension of ourselves and our intimate relationships, allowing us to do intimate family work using ICT. Different ICTs have different potentials and afford for varying levels of intimacy.

A key linked concept to intimacy is privacy. We clearly see in this study how the constant negotiation of family communication on an act-by-act basis means that negotiating who to communicate with also becomes a question of who we exclude. The fact that the Swedish well-fare system reduces the dependency between generations means that control becomes less of an issue than in other cultural contexts. Swedes are comparatively young when they move away from home and can live their lives relatively economically independent from their parents (Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020). The fact that university is free and the state provides eldercare are other factors that reduce the dependency between generations. In other words, people more easily can live private lives. Privacy and intimacy can then be seen as different needs, constantly negotiated in the micro-politics of everyday family communication. Still, the degree and the ways in which ICTs are used for control within intimate family work remain a question for further research in Sweden and beyond.

This study argues that how family intimacy is done across households is affected by the shift to personal technologies such as smartphones as in our interviews with Swedish multi-generational families, we see that responsibilities and practices of family communication become part of family work, through personalized technology, for every individual family member. However, we also show how certain practices mean we must rethink the idea that household-to-household communication is not relevant in the context of individualized networks, as various aspects of the poly-media landscape can reinforce the sharing of home. The qualitative nature of this study means that we have been able to delve into the small acts of intimate family work within Swedish families.

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