

# Kinwork revisited: The gendered work of keeping up with family through communication technology

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## Abstract

Kinwork is the maintenance of cross-household kin and family ties through both physical and mediated means and is a type of unpaid labour historically performed by women. However, changing gender norms, new communicative practices such as networked individualism, and internet and communication technologies are changing how kinwork is done. This study explores how these changes affect the gendered nature of kinwork. Swedes from multigenerational, cross-household families residing in Sweden and the United States took part in primarily home-based interviews (n=40). This empirical study explores current practices of kinwork, focusing on three empirical cases, Christmas cards for seasonal greetings, phone calls for birthday well-wishes, and digital communication for everyday contact. Results highlight how kinwork in the sample is performed by both men and women through a wide range of communication technologies. The study shows that due to new gendered norms, women in the younger generations are less willing to do kinwork for men than older generations in the same kinship networks, indicating generational differences rather than family differences. In the study, men use new internet and communication technology to both do and sometimes take responsibility for kinwork while older communication technologies retain a feminine coding, sometimes resulting in abandonment. Contemporary digital communication technology supports a shift to individual communication rather than group-based which further supports men's increased engagement in kinwork. The study concludes that kinwork in the studied sample is performed by both men and women and that contemporary kinwork can only be understood by looking at the complex entanglements of evolving gender equality norms, trends towards more individual communication patterns, and affordances of communication technology. Together these result in new ways and opportunities for doing kinwork, which becomes less the work of women and more the work of networked individuals, whatever gender.

## Keywords

family, communication, gender, kinwork, ICT, networked individualism, social relationships, unpaid labour, Human–Computer Interaction

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## Introduction

In 1987, Di Leonardo wrote in her seminal work that ‘the creation and maintenance of kin and quasi-kin networks in advanced industrial societies is work; moreover, it is largely women’s work’ (p. 443). This so-called kinwork is done to maintain cross-household, intergenerational family ties through both physical and mediated means and is a type of unpaid communicative labour taking place in extended families. Di Leonardo (1987) highlighted the (micro) management skills and emotional and empathic energies that communicative kinwork takes. She also showed how this work was women’s work, often devalued and seen as effortless leisure.

However, things have changed in the more than 30 years since the study was published. In a PEW research report focusing on changes in attitudes around the globe on issues such as family and gender, results showed that 30,133 people from 27 countries, in general, believed that in the last 20 years, gender equality had risen while family ties had faded (Pew Research Center, 2019). Accordingly, the world is experiencing the continuing detraditionalization of Western society and family, which goes in tandem with the progressing liberation of women and ideals of intimacy and romantic love, which now have come to define marriage and family life (Giddens, 1993). Does this mean that gendered kinwork routines are changing?

Additionally, ‘networked individualism’, which identifies a shift to more individual communication patterns with the individual as the centre of their network (Rainie and Wellman, 2014), has impacted family communication. Kinwork, as shown in Di Leonardo’s (1987) work, is built on women managing the entire family’s communication as a representative of the family in communication with other households. Yet, networked individualism means a transformation of family communication from household-to-household, to person-to-person communication with individual family members, rather than the family as a group being the basis for kin communication (Sadowski and Eklund, 2021).

Finally, the rise of internet and communication technologies (ICTs) has drastically changed the opportunities for cross-household communication. For example, photo streams and digital post-cards are used today instead of paper cards and printed photos. In other words, digital technology is now ubiquitous for doing kinwork (Hermida and Casas-Mas, 2020; Mok et al., 2010) such as extended family relations (Hänninen et al., 2018) whether it is through video call software, messaging services, and more.

These trends – detraditionalization of the family and changing gender norms, networked individualism, and rise of ICTs – might impact the practice of kinwork through shifting gender and family norms, new communication structures, and new tools to engage in kinwork. There is currently a lack of studies examining family relationship management across households and generations, and indeed, not many studies on kinwork using digital communication (Braithwaite et al., 2017). More specifically, to my knowledge, there is little to no research on how these developments affect the traditionally feminine nature of kinwork as identified by Di Leonardo in 1987 and how kinwork is done through multiple types of communication technology, both ‘old’ and ‘new’.

This study begins to fill this gap through multigenerational interviews including 40 Swedes living in Sweden and the United States across 18 households, in turn, connected through six kinship networks. The study attempts to make gender visible by paying attention to the micropolitics of family life (Allen, 2016). I use the terms men and women, as this is how my informants defined themselves. I also use the term family to signify those my informants define as their family, generally, a group comprised of partners, children, parents, and siblings, kin as more distant relatives, and kinship networks comprised of several related (through blood or romantic relations)

families. Furthermore, I pay attention to both ‘old’ and ‘new’ communication practices and technologies to explore the complex interweaving of gender and kinwork in a changing media landscape. The explorative research questions are:

- 1) How is communicative kinwork done across a range of ‘old’ and ‘new’ ICTs among the interviewed Swedes?
- 2) How are the gendered nature of kinwork and expectations of performing kinwork changing?

Specifically, I draw on the experience of the sample at hand. I make no pretence at universalism, nor do I talk for other types of families across the globe, of which there are many. A significant body of literature explores transnational families, where one or several family members, often mothers, migrate to the global North for work (Kang, 2012; Madianou and Miller, 2013; Parreñas, 2005). This literature, while relevant, does not explore how kinwork is performed in networked individualism or in the context of global North families, where moving for work is more often done for personal fulfilment than economic necessity.

Results explore physical postcards for Christmas greetings, phone calls for birthday greetings, and social media for regular contact. Results indicate that kinwork in the studied sample is performed by both men and women and that contemporary kinwork can only be understood by looking at the *complex entanglements* of evolving gender equality norms, trends towards more individual communication patterns, and affordances of communication technology. Together these result in new patterns and opportunities for the doing of kinwork, which becomes less the work of women and more the work of networked individuals, whatever gender.

## Background

*Families and kinship have not disappeared as fatalistically as originally speculated; they continue to exist, reshaping old sociological categories, bringing new vocabulary, and adding concepts to the field. (Morgan, 2011: p. 269)*

The concept of family, and by extension kin, is inherently hard to define, as every single individual has their definition of who their family is, even within the same households (Trost, 1990). Historically, family might often have been defined based on societal regulations such as inheritance law, yet contemporary ideals define family as a self-chosen unit based on love, where the individual has a place to grow and evolve (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004). As the regulative context for the family has loosened, the family is increasingly seen as made rather than a static, fixed unit. In Morgan’s concept of family practices, ‘there is no such thing as “The Family”’ (Morgan, 2011: 3). Instead, the family is seen as relational, it is not, but is done. It builds on the idea of doing, in analogy to doing gender, a term coined by West and Zimmerman (West and Zimmerman, 1987) yet popularized by Butler (1990). Doing gender is for Butler (1990) an ongoing iterative practice, and I think about doing family and kinship in a similar way, as ongoing iterative actions, small or large, which people perform. It allows me to highlight how family and kin come to be in what is perceived as mundane everyday acts. The deinstitutionalized family, extended or insular, comes to be in family practices, and kinwork is one such practice explicitly aimed at cross-household kin relations.

### *Kinwork and new communication patterns and technologies*

Di Leonardo's notion of kinwork (1987) describes the everyday tasks to sustain family and kin intimacy and cohesion across households. Di Leonardo phrased the term to describe an aspect of unpaid, undervalued, and often invisible emotional labour that women traditionally do. Letters, telephone calls, and postcards are all types of communicative technology drawn on in kinwork, and today a wide variety of digital technology is part of that, such as text messages, private social media groups, video calls, and much more (Sadowski and Eklund, 2021). Communication technology is used for significant events such as digital participation in funeral practices (Enari and Rangiwai, 2021), to the micro-coordination of daily family life supported by mobile technology (Wajcman, 2007).

A critical shift that goes hand in hand with the increasing use of digital communication technologies for kinwork is the move from household-to-household to person-to-person communication, that is, from postcards and from households and landline phones, to individualized communication patterns and technologies. This shifting paradigm away from group-centred communication has been dubbed networked individualism (Wellman et al., 2003). It describes a shift from tightly knit communities, like households, to networked people who connect as individuals and not as groups or members of a group.

In other words, 'in the world of networked individuals, it is the person who is the focus: not the family, not the work unit, not the neighbourhood, and not the social group' (Rainie and Wellman, 2014: 6). Even though, as Rainie and Wellman (2014), as well as Castells (2002), have argued, this change started before the advent of the internet and is part of a general trend of individualization, processes of digitalization act as accelerators and fortify this trend for people's social lives; shifting focus from densely knit families to dispersed personal networks.

Consequently, communicative practices are changing in concrete family life. In other words, in the past, families more often acted as one communicative unit; for example, sending out Holiday cards in the name of the family or relying on one spokesperson, traditionally the wife/mother, for keeping up with family and kin (Di Leonardo, 1987), today adults and young family members are carrying their own, personal communicative tool – the mobile phone – in their pocket and are increasingly responsible for their own family and kin relationships. Increasingly, the elderly are adopting digital communication technology, spurred on by younger family members (Siibak and Tamme, 2013).

Various communication technologies are used today for kinwork communication, but likely in a different way than older technology. While overlapping in use and intentions for use, communication technology tends to occupy a different communication niche (Ramirez et al., 2008). Against this backdrop of understanding communication technologies as a means to create and maintain cross-household family intimacy on the one hand and the individualizing social tendencies in communication on the other, and the history of kinwork as a feminine labour, it is imperative to investigate how the gendered nature of kinwork might be changing.

### *Gender, family, and technology*

Recently research has studied the creative work involved in gendered day-to-day family life (Mikats et al., 2021), and this study further adds to this emergent strand of research by addressing the gap in previous work of gendered division of labour around doing kinwork with and through communication technologies, including contemporary ICTs. The work at hand starts from the standpoint of the social shaping of technology, specifically looking at the intertwined effect of technology, societal

changes such as networked individualism, as well as norms concerning everyday behaviour. While technology matters for the material parts of our lives and how we live together, it is one force shaping behaviour among many.

While kinwork has been feminine-coded, much new technology is instead masculine-coded (Cockburn and Fûrst-Dilic, 1994). Yet, as ICTs have become domesticated (Arnold et al., 2006), a taken-for-granted part of household life, connotations and gender assumptions often change. Research on digital technology use increasingly shows convergent frequencies of use for men and women (Findahl, 2017) and in the United States, as an example, the frequency of email communication with family, spouses, and close friends is almost the same for men and women (Boneva and Kraut, 2008). However, other studies suggest that social media, such as Facebook, is used more by women to maintain close ties than men (Krasnova et al., 2017). ICTs, as modern technologies, can be seen as constituting reference points around which identity, gender, and intersubjectivity are articulated, constructed, negotiated, and contested (Arnold et al., 2006). In other words, technology as material objects can act as scaffolding for the doing of gender identity (Lally 2002).

ICTs are now used for kinwork, yet little is known about what this means for how kinwork is gendered and done in small everyday acts.

## Method

I conducted in-depth, open structure interviews (Hayes, 2000) primarily in people's homes. As family life still mostly takes place behind closed doors, researchers cannot fully understand it unless they enter through those doors to study it (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). 40 Swedes, connected in six kinship networks and living in 18 households were present for the interviews. I used stratified quota sampling (Kothari, 2004) with three predefined sampling locations: the Swedish countryside, a larger urban area in Sweden, and a large urban area on the US west coast (with emigrated Swedish families; two households). The goal was not to compare but to gain contested views and analytical depth by widening the range of informants. I reached informants via community representatives and social media channels.

The interviews took place individually or in groups, depending on the informants' preferences, time constraints, and relationship status. Most interviews took place in the informants' homes, but there were a few exceptions; a few individual interviews took place at workplaces during lunch. Four interviews with five adults were conducted face-to-face in the United States, and 20 interviews were conducted in total. The 40 family members present during the interviews aged 1–86. Everyone spoke Swedish at home and defined themselves as Swedish, and parents discussed the communicative habits of small children. To maintain confidentiality, no names are used in quotations. Instead, I use the form Gender.Sampling location.Age. Citations have been edited for clarity.

Of the adults, 17 held a university degree or equivalent, and 11 had a secondary school degree or lower. Most adults worked or were retired, three (two women and one man) were on parental leave, and one woman was a homemaker. Their professions were as diverse as fast-food restaurant employee, lumber size controller, architect, or biomedicine analyst. All adults and children over the age of 12 had a mobile phone. Everyone had access to the internet at home. All adults in a relationship lived in a heterosexual relationship. This was not an intended sample strategy; all written and oral descriptions of the project clearly stated that 'all family types are welcome'. Possible explanations are that the sampling size, while suitable for the study, was too small to capture all family types, chance, or that other families did not feel included in the description. Family, or in Swedish *familj*, is a term that generally, and particularly in the data at hand, refers not only to a

person's household but also includes grandparents, parents, and siblings. Sometimes, a partner's family or cousins are included.

A dual-earner, separate taxation system characterizes the Swedish family structure, with a high acceptance of alternative family forms such as cohabitation and relatively equal parenting opportunities for (separated) mothers and fathers (Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020).

Sampling stopped at the predefined quota of six kinship networks, yet saturation was reached before this point. Meaning that while new anecdotes came up, arguments were similar throughout the interviews, and in the final interviews, nothing new was learned on the topic.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and data was compiled in the qualitative analysis software, NVivo (version 11, 2016). It was inductively and systematically coded (Gibbs, 2007) where the data material provided codes and structures. This created an understanding that the way that kinwork was done by men and women varied across generations, technological platforms, and kinwork practices. This served as a base for an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012) where I performed a second focused coding on instances of gendered use and attitudes across three kinwork practices with clearly linked communication technologies which emerged as prominent first during the early interviews, (which shaped later interviews) and also in the systematic coding: postcards for Christmas greetings, phone calls for birthday greetings, and digital kinwork for everyday contact. Other practices were identified but not as common or interesting for the analysis at hand, for example, invitations for weddings and similar more irregular events.

## Results

The results explore and compare three types of technologies, moving from old to newer, and particular kinwork practices associated with these to highlight the complex ways in which changing gender norms, new communication patterns, and technology affect the gendered nature of kinwork. I first explore sending Christmas greetings through postcards, a tradition historically popular in Sweden even though it stems from the United Kingdom in the mid-1800s. The image on the card sometimes has Christian connotations, but in Sweden as a secular country motives more often depict *Tomten* (a Swedish version of Santa which mixes in older folklore) or nature scenes. Secondly, I explore telephoning for birthday greetings using landlines or mobile phones. Landline telephones are increasingly rare in Sweden yet they still exist. Lastly, I explore regular contact through digital communication media. This entails written chat communication, video calls, and other messaging applications.

### *Christmas cards – old technology, old norms*

Christmas cards, once such an essential part of Christmas in the Christian world, are a practice in steady decline. In the mid-90s, Swedes still sent 60 million Christmas cards a year; in 2017, it had dropped to 20.5 million; and in 2018, only 16.5 million Christmas cards were sent (PostNord, 2018; SVT, 2017). Although part of the decline might be due to people moving to digital formats for their Christmas cards, the massive decrease cannot be solely explained by this. Less than half of the households in the sample send physical Christmas cards each year. None send digital ones, although a few had tried it once or twice. In the oldest generation, in particular, among those over retirement age, it is often, although not always, considered a crucial part of kinwork for Christmas.

Woman.US.75: Yes, it is a very old tradition. You could say that I have sent Christmas cards my entire life, it started the first year I was married and then it has continued, it is a ritual that has been with me through all times.

As in the quote, Christmas cards are connected to marrying and starting your own family. They are a way to communicate outwards about who is family and show those you care about that they are on your mind. Digital Christmas cards are not accepted by the families in the study for these reasons. The digital format is not seen as personal enough to be able to convey the intended meaning as a sign of affection, and policing of these boundaries occurs, as in the following quote where a relative sent a digital card 1 year:

Woman.Countryside.77: [HUSBAND'S SISTER] sent a Christmas card on the computer

Man.Countryside.79: Yes, that we couldn't stand

Woman.Countryside.77: and we waited and waited and asked ourselves why she didn't send any [physical card]

Man.countryside.79: and then my wife put her foot down, 'You don't send Christmas cards on the computer'

Woman.Countryside.77: No, I did not say that [Man.Countryside.79: you send a card] but, 'can't you afford to send Christmas cards in [town name]' and she didn't do it again. \*laughter\*

In the following interview with the husband's sister in question (75 years old), she explains that while she has tried, she finds digital Christmas cards too impersonal.

However, among some elderly and in particular younger households, Christmas cards are a thing of the past. Woman.US.72: 'I stopped sending Christmas cards, it was too much work'. Christmas cards are connected to unpaid labour; it takes time and cognitive effort to manage each year, and thus, some women choose not to send them. For the participants, Christmas cards fall clearly into the feminine domain and so it is women who do not send them, not men. During an interview with a city couple nearing their 70s, both still working in high management positions, the woman replies that she thinks about Christmas cards every year, but never gets around to it. It is clear that if they would send Christmas cards, she is the one who would do it, and indeed was the one who did it when they were younger. Instead, they send out a digital yearbook about what has happened to the family during the year. It is a tradition that she has upheld from her mother. The man adds that: 'We would like to continue, or rather you', showing how this work is hers.

Indeed, in all seven households who send them, Christmas cards are the women's responsibility. Even in the couple which appears as the most gender equal in the sample. In this family of four, living in a big city, the parents are both well-educated with white-collar jobs. They are very aware of gendered labour and talk about how they make sure to split household and care work. They divided parental leave in exactly half with both their two daughters, and at the time of the interviews, the father is in the middle of his parental leave while the mother is working full time. However, even in this family, Christmas cards are the woman's responsibility:

Interviewer: So is it anyone who makes sure that the Christmas cards get sent?

Woman.City.36: Mm, that is definitely me. I feel like PARTNER is a bit of a free rider because he thinks it is nice that we do it. He would not make sure to do it himself, but I think that he appreciates that I do it.

Then he gets to be a part of it, write on the cards and approve and such, but I think that it would not happen otherwise, we can joke a bit about it and I can think that ‘seriously it feels like you [he] thinks that this is very nice and important but gets it a little bit for free’.

In his interview, he says that she is in charge of this and says that perhaps it should not be like that. While many other participants see it as the domain of women, as in the following quote. Here, the wife takes care of the one Christmas card they send, which goes to a friend of her husband:

Woman.Contryside.45: FEMALE FRIEND normally gets a card

Man.Countryside.47: but that’s because she is so nice herself and also she normally sends me postcards.

Woman.Contryside.45: But we should admit now for the sake of honesty that it is I who send the card, even though it is HUSBAND’s old friend, but I like FEMALE FRIEND a lot and have got to know her over the years.

As in the quote, Christmas cards represent a type of household-to-household communication. One person might do the practical work of sending a card, but as a kinwork practice, it is meant as a greeting from a group, a family.

For those who have given up on Christmas cards, it is clear that it is considered too labour-intensive. The result hints at a partial explanation of why fewer Christmas cards are sent. This communication technology is governed by older norms on what is feminine and masculine labour in the home. The norms surrounding unpaid labour are changing and in response, women are changing their behaviour; the consequence is that the practice is abandoned as there seems to be no uptake by men. Neither do the participants move this kinwork practice to new technological formats.

### *Phoning for birthdays – generational differences*

Birthdays are significant ritual events constituting a key opportunity for doing kinwork. Who is to be congratulated, in what manner, and by whom is a concrete example of how the micropolitics of everyday family and kin life play out. Even in a time of de-ritualization, family rituals seem to live on, yet in new shapes and forms (Costa, 2013). In the study at hand, birthdays matter. They have to be marked and even constitute one of the key rituals around which extended family is maintained.

Interview: So tell me, how do you keep in contact with your family members?

Woman.US.72: We call each other and meet on birthdays. And well at other times as well of course.

Physical visits are key for close family and for even birthdays such as 30 or 50, or important ones such as 18, the age one enters into adulthood in Sweden. Still, phoning is the standard for all close kin ties. When the landline telephone was first introduced, it soon became a distinct feminine technology, belonging to the domestic sphere and iconic for female intimacy (Moyal, 1989). However, mobile phones have been shown to be more gender-neutral (Lemish and Cohen, 2005).

The more distant the kin, the more common text messages, and social media posts became for birthday greetings.

Woman.Countryside.25: I try to phone them [relatives], even if you write on Facebook or such it is not at ALL the same thing as phoning and showing that you care, because Facebook is pretty shallow.



Social media is seen as too shallow to use for birthday congratulations for close family, as in the quote above, and are in some of the interviews even described as an affront, an unacceptable form of greeting for birthdays between grandparents, parents, and grown children. Yet in the data, social media becomes increasingly accepted as kin relationships become more distant and intimacy less critical.

How family members use phones, mobile, or landlines for birthday greetings is marked by generational differences. In the older generations, women take care of the birthday congratulations:

Interviewer: So you phone on birthdays then?

Man.Countryside.79: Sometimes, she takes care of that

As in the quote, in couples over 70, the woman is in charge of such kinwork, phoning family members, including his and her relatives. These participants accept that kinwork is a feminine task: part of the division of labour.

In the younger generations, this is different. Two trends are apparent; one is that neither men nor women see it as women's responsibility to congratulate or contact the man's parents or siblings for him, as in the quote below.

Woman.US. 44: You phone and say congratulations on their birthday and it is really only mum really, and I think HUSBAND sometimes phones and sometimes he emails congratulations. But I and my siblings all have our birthdays (...) within two weeks in the summer so we are together then, it is just mum [whom she phones].

As she says, she 'thinks' her husband phones his family on their birthdays. It is not her responsibility to ensure he does, and she does not do his kinwork for him. Below, a countryside mother in her early 30s explains that her husband phones his parents on their birthdays, 'No but, then it is more that he phones and then we sing, and yeah it is him that takes care of the call'. The work of remembering birthdays and making sure people are congratulated is not seen as the woman's task. In some sense, particularly for more distant family members, Facebook with its constant reminders on whose birthday it is today has taken over some of the work of remembering birthday dates.

The second trend is how phoning, not only for birthdays but generally, is done from and to mobile phones instead of landlines. The personal, individual nature of mobile phones impacts how communication is handled. As this man talking about phoning outside of birthdays explains:

Man.Countryside.57. Someone said that when you call people it is to your own children, you don't call their partner or their [mobile phone] when you don't have a landline. It has become a large difference really. SON has a partner but I would never call her. You don't do that so then you talk less to her.

This quote spotlights one of the cores of networked individualism, a perceived change towards personal technology where everyone has their mobile phone. A change from the shared landline, which was more of a shared resource in the household, in some cases mostly answered and used by women. In the conversation the quote comes from, the man talks about how and when he phones his children. His children only have mobile phones, so he does not talk to their partners outside of birthdays. Calling the partners feels like too big a step, and the nature of mobile phones means losing a previous accidental conversation situation. This was an experience shared by men and women alike in the sample. Networked individualism means that each family member is the centre of their

own communicative network, men as well as women. This, together with changing gender norms on unpaid labour in heterosexual relationships, changes how kinwork is being done.

### *Digital kinwork – new technology, new norms*

Regarding kinwork through digital media, a complex pattern of technological affordances and gendered norms emerges. Both men and women do kinwork through digital means. For example, through family chat groups and picture sharing, or individual messaging between family members. Important for digital kinwork is how the tools are used: the laptop, tablet, or smartphone and associated accounts on social media platforms are all individual. While Christmas cards and landline phones are household properties, the smartphone is the ultimate personal effect; see the following quote:

Man.City.35: PARTNER decides over her computer and I make decisions for mine, it is just personal things like this, what's personal. What do we have that's personal [asking himself]? Well maybe clothes and such, could it be like cufflinks and then it is the computer and phone and that's pretty much it, the rest is shared, we eat on the same china and so on.

This quote together with the discussion above indicates that men in the younger generations of the sample engage with digital kinwork since women of these generations (in contrast to the older couples) do not do it for them due to changing gender norms, it is their own networks, not shared family ones and, the technology is their own instead of household properties.

Digital kinwork is structured around the daily connections between family members, whether from the immediate or extended family. In particular, keeping in touch with siblings, in other words, family members of the same generation that have similar technology habits is done through digital means. For contact with siblings, it is apparent in the data how, apart from the eldest generation, this is something men and women do individually.

Interviewer: You said something earlier about it becoming easier with social media?

Man.US.46: (...) It is easier to just send a message (...) I know what my siblings do so I also feel that I know roughly what they are doing even though I haven't talked to them so it doesn't feel like such a big step to send a message saying "I saw you did this and this"

For this man living in the United States, Facebook makes it easier to maintain everyday contact with his siblings living in Sweden, and in this case, led to an increase in physical meetings. The barrier to making contact, for this man, felt easier to overcome when contact is regular through social media.

In the quote below, a man in his early 20s talks about his contact with his brother.

Man.Countryside.25: We have a bit of direct contact if something happens...

Interviewer: Do you have an example?

Man.Countryside.25: Yeah, he [brother] had some schism with his girlfriend not that long ago then it was me who sent him a message saying that he should have fun that night and not focus on a lot of sad things. I think he understood the message, without me saying it to him directly.

He explains how his contact with his brother, while they do not have regular phone conversations, takes place via Facebook messenger. When pushed for an example of what they talk about, the man recounts their latest interaction, where he attempted to provide emotional support to his brother after he had fought with his girlfriend.

Men also take charge of their sibling relations vis-à-vis their female partners, making sure that they have some contact. In other words, taking responsibility not only for one's kin relations but also that of other family members, and this is a point where the generational differences are put to their point. During a long conversation about sibling contact, this young woman briefly explains how her contact with her male partner's sister takes place:

Woman.Countryside.25: It is he [male partner, who phones] sometimes he walks over [to me] and then I talk to her through the phone, saying hi and such.

Woman.Countryside.25: It is foremost he [male partner, who keeps in contact with his sister], sometimes he comes over and then we talk to her on the phone and I can say hi and such.

This partner in the quote is the one who maintains his relationship with his sister at the same time as he acts as a mediator in his sister and his wife's relationship. For the woman in this quote, this is seen as unproblematic, and she discusses it in the context of her relationship with her husband's family. He thus engages in and takes responsibility for kinwork beyond himself. The pattern repeats itself among several of the younger couples. Taking charge over and planning phone calls, but letting other family members say hi in the background is something women have done and do as part of their kinwork. However, making decisions on who should talk to whom might have very different connotations due to men's and women's unequal access to power in society and in the family setting.

The most common example in the data of how men takes responsibility for the kinwork of others is how fathers of young children take part in their children's communication with their parents and their partner's parents.

Man.City.35: I will skype if PARTNER is away, then I can skype with her parents and the other way around. And mum keeps contact with PARTNER. We have had some work there because mum has tried, she contacts PARTNER because she thinks that she is in charge of things at home, in a similar way that she is in her home. So I have tried to cut in between there.

In this quote, the father on parental leave engages in kinwork by video calling together with the child, planning and setting up digital meetings with his own or the mother's family. The quote also demonstrates how these norms of kinwork sometimes clash between different generations.

If Christmas cards represent the family outwards, sending digital pictures in family groups on social media fills some of the same functions. In contrast to Christmas cards, however, men in the sample also take part in this type of work, as exemplified below:

Man.City.35: In the family groups we share some pictures and such, that is the group that is used the most I think

Interviewer: What types of pictures?

Man.City.35: Foremost of the children

In the quote from the family below, living in the United States, the woman is a homemaker. This couple represents a more traditional division of labour when it comes to keeping in contact with family and kin where she is responsible for this type of labour. In this particular case as well, the man has no social media. Facebook for him, he says, is something women engage in and thus of little relevance to himself.

Woman.US.43: It is almost the case that I have more contact with his [husband's] cousins and such, through Facebook.

Man.US.55: yeah

Woman.US.43: It is almost like I inform him [of what is happening] although he sneaks a peak at mine sometimes

Man.US.55: Yeah Facebook, yes you have your nose in it all the time and I look and like 'this was a lot of fun details' but I do not have my own Facebook account, then you would never have time for anything else and it eats up a lot of time

In this family, kinwork is still seen as something for women; thus, a technology like Facebook also becomes feminine, an opinion not shared by the rest of the sample. This highlights how gender norms come in and shape the meaning of technology, and thus uses. It simply does not seem to be a question of new technology used for kinwork. Rather, *complex entanglements* of gender norms, communication structures, and technology emerge from analysing contemporary kinwork practices.

It is important to stress that older generations are not more gender unequal across the board and vice versa. Gender relations when it comes to family are much more complex. For example, I met one retired couple where the woman is the obvious person in charge of kinwork. At the time of the interview, she had just gone through hip replacement surgery. As I help her sort out an update on her new smartphone, it starts to ring as friends check in to see how she is. The first call comes from a couple they know, and in this case, the husband is the one who phones and offers the couple's joint support and empathy for her operation; he talks about his own hip replacement and hopes for her quick recovery. So even in this generation, men engage in emotional and social interaction; yet the data at hand cannot answer to what extent men's and women's care might differ. During the interview, the woman's husband leaves the interview after a while as he is very uninterested in any form of technology or kinwork, leaving all that to his wife. He comes back asking if we want coffee and sets about making coffee, defrosting biscuits, and deciding that we should have the refreshments on the balcony, where he sets the table with an old-fashioned dainty china set. Once he is ready, he asks us to take a seat. Doing gender and care work in all of these instances is a fluid process where what can be considered masculine or feminine behaviour is both supported and contradicted in the small everyday acts of family life.

## Concluding discussion

This qualitative study explores how contemporary kinwork is done. It does so by paying attention to new digital technology for performing kinwork, new individualized communication structures, and changing gender norms by comparing how kinwork is done in different generations in the same Swedish kinship networks. The analysis highlights how *complex entanglements* of gender equality norms in different generations, new, evolving social structures exemplified by networked individualism, and available technology shape how kinwork is presently done. Results indicate how

changing expectations of work division in the heterosexual family is not enough to explain the kinwork the interviewed men in the interviewed families engage in. That these men take part in, take responsibility for, and indeed do this intimate family work is here suggested to be shaped by the *complex entanglements* of evolving gender norms on unpaid household labour, the emerging social structure of networked individualism, and the affordances of contemporary digital communication technology; which together supports new patterns and opportunities for the doing of kinwork.

Ann Oakley (1974) said in her classic text *The Sociology of Housework* that ‘The force of tradition should never be underestimated’ (p. vii). This mirrors well the way kinwork is structured. Christmas cards, a traditional and, in many ways, unchanged way of engaging in kinwork resist change much more than kinwork relying on new and evolving technology forms. The purpose of Christmas cards, a greeting from a group to a group, is, moreover, not easily translated into digital formats. In contrast, contemporary digital communication technology encourages a shift to individual-to-individual communication rather than group-based, which further supports men’s increased engagement in kinwork. Furthermore, the study shows how women in the younger generations are less willing to do kinwork than the older generations in the same kinship networks. This strengthens the indication that rather than family-level differences, the results indicate generational differences. Contemporary digital communication technology, in particular, reduces the initial cost of engaging in kinwork for men and provides them with a more neutral medium to use for kinwork. Indeed, the strict coding of kinwork as feminine seems to be loosening due to these entanglements of changing gender norms, new individualized communication structures, and new technology.

Technology for housework has persistently not led to a decrease in how much time women spend on household labour, instead, higher and higher standards have become the goal (Bittman et al., 2004). In this data focusing on communicative, unpaid labour in the form of kinwork, some practices are abandoned yet others, using ICTs are added to the kinwork repertoire. It begs for more studies looking into time spent and frequencies of kinwork as various communication technologies are used for kinwork, yet do not occupy the same communication niche (see Ramirez et al., 2008). I want to stress again that it is not the technologies per se but the complex entanglements and relations between technologies, evolving social structures, and behaviours that seem to be affecting how kinwork is done. As Lally (2002) argued, ‘material culture may, ... act in an “anchoring” mode, as “scaffolding” for the self, as placeholders which have a role for individuals in maintaining ontological security and a sense of self in everyday life’ (p. 25). So the meaning and practices of digital and non-digital kinwork become closely associated with how we understand ourselves as men and women and the ways in which family practices become gender coded. In association with technology, we perform gendered identity work. In the doing of contemporary kinwork what can be considered masculine or feminine behaviour is both supported and contradicted in the small everyday acts of kinwork in family life. However, this particular gendered practice might be changing faster than others in the family, due to not only being reliant on changing gender norms but also technological changes as well as changing communication structures in society.

Elizabeth Pleck (2000) argues that there is no de-ritualization of contemporary societies, but rather a change in the forms of celebration of rituals, which in some cases may give the illusion of them having disappeared. Kinwork has by no means disappeared, but it is in some instances done in new ways with new tools. Kinwork, in this study, constitutes a key practice in the doing of (extended) family, of maintaining kin relations across households and thus family relations beyond the nuclear unit. Sweden is, in many ways, a country where norms of gender equality are widespread. However, the reality is, of course, more complex; while women take part in paid labour to a higher degree than in many other countries, Sweden still has a gender-segregated labour market

where overall trends show that women work part-time in care and the public sector and men full time in production and the private sector (Statistics Sweden, 2022) and women still, despite increased labour market participation, take on the primary responsibility for household work and child care (Statistics Sweden, 2022). So it is unlikely that the results are due to some extreme uniqueness of Sweden in the case of expectations of gender equality, while of course evolving gender norms and debates on unpaid labour in the heterosexual family undoubtedly play a part. Yet, as the results highlight, changing gender norms alone does not explain the change in how kinwork is performed. Instead, contemporary processes of individualism, changing family traditions, and high availability of personal, digital technology are affecting most parts of the world, albeit likely to different extents in various parts of the world.

Additionally, it is important to lift that what the results indicate here with shared or distributed kinwork might not be the same as gender equality. They might be linked, occasionally and often, but not all of the time. It might mean more equality in the family, as women's allotted emotional labour diminishes, but not gender equality on a larger scale, where what is considered masculine and feminine changes, and where the communicative habits of men and women start to converge. For example, an Australian study showed that while all family members took part in family social labour, the heaviest burden was typically carried by women, and predominantly women used communication technology such as video software to keep up with family (Sinanan and Hjorth, 2018). Women might no longer be prepared to do men's kinwork for them, but that is not the same as men and women doing the same kinwork, with the same meaning and consequences. Some limitations of the study at hand are the limited sample, the focus on Swedes, and heterosexual relationships. Attention to other family types and constellations would undoubtedly offer further insights.

Finally, this study indicates that kinwork in the studied sample is performed by both men and women through a wide range of old and new communication technologies and that contemporary kinwork can only be understood by looking at the complex entanglements of evolving gender equality norms, trends towards more individual communication patterns, and affordances of contemporary digital technology. Together these result in new patterns and opportunities for the doing of contemporary kinwork, which challenges the previous feminine coding of this unpaid labour.

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