

# Can digital presence reconfigure experiences of absence?



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

**5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Mobilities Symposium:  
Future Mobilities and Resilience  
3<sup>rd</sup> July 2014**

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University of the  
West of England

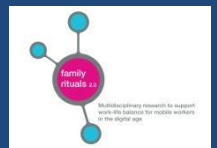


# Overview

- Aim
- Context
- Preliminary findings
- Future Resilience
- Conclusions

# Project aim

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



# CONTEXT

# Work related mobility

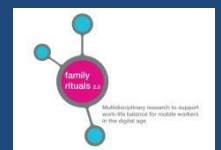
- Seafarers, drivers (transport/haulage)
- Military
- Sales, Construction, Energy
- Air crew, tourism
- Business travel
  
- Globalisation
  - International companies, markets, services
  - Knowledge exchange

# Where is home? What is family?

- Recognise terms 'home' and 'family' are contested
- Home and family have meaning to people
- Located, but more than location
  - Anchor, mooring
  - Relational
  - Flows
- Family practices
  - Comings and goings, corporeal and virtual flows
  - Activities in and out of 'home'
  - Timings, schedules and synchronisation
  - Obligations

# Family Rituals and Routines

- Events and activities of significance
  - Bind family relationships
  - Have meaning to the family
  - May be significant, or more prosaic
- Routine activities
  - Need not be there to happen
- When is a ritual a routine and vice versa?



# Home and family in the digital age

- Complex spatial and temporal relationships
- Boundaries blur and extend
- Further layer of 'what is home'?



# Co-presence and virtual presence

- Richness of being there
  - Emotion
  - Sensory
  - Communication (verbal and non-verbal)
  - Tacit knowledge
- What can technology replace?
  - Work place travel replacing with virtual presence?
    - Economic and sustainability issues
  - Social networks an added layer to life?
    - Sustaining and maintaining at-a-distance
  - Does travel become more acceptable with digital technology sustaining family relationships?

# DATA GENERATION

# Sample

- Mobile workers = People who are absent over night at least 6 times a year because of work
- 18 Mobile worker interviews completed
  - Consultancies, Law, Communications, NGOs, Project management, Charity, Education, Aviation, Beverage industry, Financial Ombudsman, Oil Industry, Publishing
  - 6 Women and 12 Men
  - 12 with children at home; 1 with elderly mother; rest living with partner.
- 7 Family interviews completed
- Mostly mobile through choice
  - Autonomy to choose when
  - Or a particular role e.g. pilot

# Method

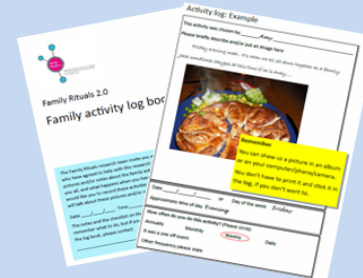
Researcher talks with worker who travels away

How long? About 60 minutes

Where? Home, work or over Skype/phone

Recorded? Audio recording

Family\* Activity Log Book  
Family members  
collect five images  
or make short notes of  
activities you do as a family



Researcher talks with worker **and** family  
members (including children if applicable)

How long? About 90 minutes

Where? In your home

Recorded? Audio recording

\*A family can be any combination of people; you do not have to have children.  
However, you must live with at least one other person to take part.

# Booklet examples

## Activity log

This activity was chosen by: \_\_\_\_\_

Please briefly describe and/or put an image here  
To solve this puzzle each 3x3 box, each row and column must contain the numbers 1-9. There are numerous strategies to help you solve sudoku.

**SUDOKU**

MODERATE NO 2604

9	2	5	8	6	4	1	7	3
4	3	6	1	9	7	2	5	8
1	7	8	2	5	3	9	6	4
5	8	2	9	3	1	6	4	7
6	1	4	5	7	8	3	9	2
3	9	7	4	2	6	5	8	1
2	6	1	7	4	9	8	3	5
8	4	9	3	1	5	7	2	6
7	5	3	6	8	2	4	1	9

**CODEWORDS** 256 367 478 M

Date 2 / 3 / 14 or Day of the week SUNDAY  
 Approximate time of day 2pm (after lunch with cup of Tea)

How often do you do this activity? (Please circle)

Annually      Monthly      Weekly      Daily  
 It was a one off event  
2-5 x p/wk.  
 Other frequency please state

## Activity log

This activity was chosen by: \_\_\_\_\_

Please briefly describe and/or put an image here



Social Tennis

1 set together  
 + NM 2 sets  
 SU to clubhouse

Date 5 / 4 / 14 or Day of the week SAT  
 Approximate time of day 2pm

How often do you do this activity? (Please circle)

Annually      Monthly      Weekly      Daily  
 It was a one off event  
 Other frequency please state

# PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

# Why travel for work?

- Central to job
  - Pilot, cabin crew, drivers...
- Need for face to face for work
  - Setting up own businesses
  - Checking in as a contractor
  - Running courses/training
  - Providing a service overseas (VSO, tourism)
- Job opportunities/money

# Routines and structures

- Routines defined by regular activities
- List types of routines/rituals ...
- Family meals
  - In the home
    - Preparing/sharing
  - Outside of the home
    - Restaurants, cafes, etc...
- Sports and games
  - Sports
    - Playing or supporting
  - Board games/puzzles
  - Family-specific games
    - “Bedtime quiz”
- Religious activities
- Social activities
  - Meeting friends together
  - Meeting up with wider family
- Family holidays
  - With each other
  - With wider family
  - With friends
- Day-to-day activities
  - Bedtimes
  - ‘Flopping’ on the sofa
  - Mealtimes
  - Watching TV/listening to radio
  - Shopping
  - Reading
- Family-specific activities
  - “Film club”
- Dancing
- Walks
- Cycle rides
- Birthdays
- Christmases
- Easter
- Half term
- Anniversaries
- Festivals



# Family Activities - Rituals and Routines

- Example: Food and drink
  - Being together
    - Spending time shopping for ingredients
    - Food and drink are a part of broader rituals
    - Spending time over dinner
    - Going out together
  - Creating together
    - Cooking often important
    - Working as a team or talking whilst cooking
      - Sharing cooking

# Family Activities - Rituals and Routines

## Day to day routines

- In the home
  - Cooking/eating together
  - Sunday morning Sudoku
  - TV viewing
  - Hanging out
  - Children's bedtime
- Outdoors
  - Walks, cycling, sports, dancing, etc
  - Meals out, drinking, socialising
  - Hanging out

# Connecting home: technologies

- Phone-calls
- Text messages
- Skype
- Facetime
- Emails
- Facebook
- Snapchat
- Postcards

# Connecting home: communication

- Checking in
- Care
- Jobs
- Consoling
- Parenting
- Sharing experience
  - Tension of sharing a good time
- BUT
  - Often better not to communicate because .....

# Connecting home: time

- Challenge of synchronising
  - Time zones
- Availability
  - Mobile worker
    - Meetings
    - Working late
    - Socialising
  - Home
    - Family routine – disruption
    - Absence is more visible

# Experience of time

- Dead time for mobile workers
  - Time to do other things
  - Getting boring jobs done
  - Maintaining other social relationships whilst away
    - Visiting family
    - Visiting friends
  - Can be boring
    - Impersonality of the hotel
    - Living out of a bag – ‘Unequipped’

# Tensions in the experiences of absence

- Mobile workers
  - Positive aspects
  - “Time off” “free time”, “adventure” “autonomy” “escape”
    - Away from home structures and time schedules/restrictions
  - More time with family than “normal” commuters?
  - Negative
    - Loneliness
    - Missing out
- Left behind
  - Do stuff that they want to – going out, music, eating etc
  - Left with the responsibilities of home
  - Fewer positive aspects
  - Persistence of absence can change the experience

# FUTURE RESILIENCE?



# Future mobility trajectories

- Does digital technology promote hypermobility? (John Adams, 1999)
  - Not enough evidence in our research to prove or disprove
  - Digital technology increasingly has enabled home life to be more easily accessed
  - Challenges remain for individuals

# Work-life balance

- Expectations of employer
- Lifestyle choices
- Do people need help in managing wlb here?
  - Education/information about the experience
- More than the technical mechanism of connecting home
- What more can technology offer?
  - Adaptation of existing tools around individual needs
- Knowing what it possible?

# CONCLUSIONS

# Conclusions

- Digital technologies maintain personal relationships at-a-distance
- Technology can facilitate 'glimpses' of home life/routine
  - Never a full representation
  - Sometimes positive
  - Sometimes dissatisfactory
- Tensions in the experience of absence
  - Imbalance in mobile worker and family experiences of going away
- Can digital technology do any more than it already does to support relationships with home?
- Does digital technology further embed the acceptability of business travel?

# Team partners

With particular thanks to Dr Marina Marouda and Professor Adele Ladkin, who have partnered in the collection of data presented here.

[www.familyrituals2-0.org](http://www.familyrituals2-0.org)



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Ms Jo-Anne Bichard



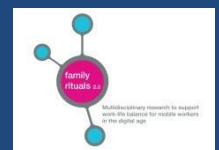
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