Can digital presence reconfigure experiences of absence?

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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.”
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.
**Activity log**

This activity was chosen by: ____________

Please briefly describe and/or put an image here:

Social Tennis

I set together
+ 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

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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

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

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family rituals 2.0

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