The "Digital Glimpse" as imagining home

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Abstract

This paper proposes the concept of the "digital glimpse", which develops the existing framing of *imaginative travel*. Here it articulates the experiences of mobile workers digitally connecting into family life and everyday rituals when physically absent with work. A large number of occupations require people to travel away from home as a part of their work. The recent embedding of digital communication technologies into

personal relationships and family life is reconfiguring how absence is experienced and practiced by workers on the move, and through this, new digital paradigms for life on-the-move are emerging.

This paper explores how such social relationships are maintained at-a-distance through digital technology – using evidence from qualitative interviews with mobile workers and their families. The aim of the paper therefore is to present a new theoretical perspective to meanings of 'absence' and 'presence' for workers on-the-move in the digital age, and to explore the consequences of the management of physical absence through digital presence. Digital technology now enables quite expressive forms of 'virtual travel', including video calling, picture sharing, and instant messaging. This has implications for the ways in which absent workers can experience being away from home, and how families can manage the social and relational pressures of being apart.

We conclude that experiences of imaginative travel created through novel media can enrich the experience and give a greater sense of connection for both those who are at home and those who are away. While technology is limited in its ability to replicate a sense of co-presence – often due to temporal and social constraints – "digital glimpses" are an emergent set of sociotechnical practices deployed that can reduce the negative impact of absence on family relationships.

Keywords

Family; ritual; imaginative travel; mobile worker; digital technology; ICT; relationship; work life balance; virtual mobility; co-presence

Introduction

Travel for work has increased over time, despite the potential of information and communication technology to substitute trips, and a large number job roles involve travelling. For many couples and families, the absence from home of one or more members through work may have a significant impact on family life. More recently, digital technology has offered ever-more expressive mechanisms for keeping in touch. In this work-related mobilities context, this paper develops the concept of 'imaginative travel' previously applied to analysis of 'virtual' tourism, to interpret the interactions of 'mobile workers' with their close family (in its many forms) through digital technologies while absent from home. In this analysis, we investigate how the affordances of digital technology create opportunities for participating in an 'imaginative' experience of family life at-a-distance.

Concepts of imaginative travel (or imagined travel) emerged from the context of tourism or migration: travellers utilise a range of media (e.g. books, photos, videos,

travel blogs, paintings, etc.) to be mentally transported to far-flung places or to 'sample' potential destinations – travellers that have been away and returned might pass on those experiences to others through their stories and photographs. These tools help the individual imagine the experience, which may direct their future tourism or migration choices.

This paper re-orientates the concept of imagined travel to interpret how mobile workers engage with the prosaic activities of home life at-a-distance using digital media. We are interested in this particular framing because firstly the interplay between physical and virtual mobility sits within these mobility debates, and secondly, it assists in considering how different technologies afford different types of interaction with places and people. Notably, we have described the digital interactions with family members analysed in this paper as "digital glimpses", and explore how these digital glimpses play a role in maintaining relationships with family members remaining at home. In the conclusions, we argue that it is important to understand how technology is shaping the experience of absence in novel and emergent ways, and that the implications for maintaining family relationships under these mobility circumstances are critical to new perspectives on work/life balance, and potentially for the health and wellbeing of the workforce.

Work-related travel is part of a wide range of different occupations. Those in roles that require travel are often referred to as 'mobile workers', but this is a broad term that covers a range of different employment contexts - from those where travel is integral, such as long distance road haulage, to 'elite' corporate travellers. In this research we are concerned with those mobile workers whose work takes them away from home overnight either for extended periods or with some form of regularity. Periods of absence can have significant consequences for work/life balance, which was an issue of principal interest to the research project 'Family Rituals 2.0', which generated the data analysed in this paper. Here the role played by digital technologies was central to the idea that such technologies may afford a connection into those meaningful times of family life for the absent family member, and thus the potential of a balance to be maintained at-a-distance. The detail of what work/life balance might mean in the context of mobile working is discussed further in a parallel paper, as are the much-debated constructs of 'family' and 'home', and 'the compulsion of proximity'[i] as important in the digital age. This present paper is focused on the practices and meanings associated with the digital connection – the digital glimpses that create imagined travel home.

To this end, this paper starts by setting out the context for the research. It gives a short insight into family practices and family rituals to demonstrate the ways in which being involved in the everyday, seemingly-mundane aspects of family life is important, before a more substantive discussion of digital technology and imaginative technology. The paper summarises the methodological approach and sets out how the concept of family has been interpreted, and then considers how the findings develop the concept of imagined travel. The conclusions set out why digital

technology can afford expressive new approaches to the maintenance of a work/life balance, but suggest that this is not without its tensions.

Fitting family rituals into work/life Balance

The relationship between *time for work* and *time for all other activities* ("life") is under active consideration by many employers, as well as being an important topic in academic debates exploring the meanings and impacts of work/life balance. Generally, employers focus on flexible hours or homeworking as a solution to employees wanting to improve their work/life balance, often couched as 'family friendly policies', where digital technologies have become an enabler of such work practices. Academics have identified that a 'healthy' work/life balance is a cornerstone of good personal relationships, health, and mental wellbeing, thus employment policies that facilitate a good work/life balance present a more attractive work environment (Dewe and Kompier, 2008; Khallash and Kruse, 2012).

However, fewer employers consider how work-related travel impacts on work life balance, with the notable exception of the military, where such long-distance relationships are carefully orchestrated (Greene *et al.* 2010; Ladkin *et al.* 2016, 2017). Work related travel puts the concept of co-presence under tension between the needs of co-presence for work and the needs for co-presence for personal life. In examining the life of seafarers, Tang (2012) therefore argues that absence, whether from working long hours, shift work, or mobile working, can have a negative effect on intimate relationships e.g. with family members. Nóvoa (2012: 352) illustrates this point in writing of his participants who were musicians on tour:

> "I remember that Pablo's daughter and one of Jonny's daughters had their birthdays while they were on tour. I clearly noticed a great discomfort in them for not being able to be present."

Here the assumed challenge is: time for "life" may be eroded if work-related travel takes people away from home and family (Roehling *et al.*, 2003; Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007; Carlson *et al.*, 2009). Thus, mobile workers can be prone to negative effects of travel and absence, which Cohen and Gössling (2015) call the "*darker side* of hypermobility" (emphasis added). Negative effects have been identified as: the mental and physical toll of travel-related stress caused by long journeys and/or sporadic/unpredictable travel patterns (Fisher and Stoneman, 1998); high workloads and long hours (Nathan and Doyle, 2001); and the erosion of the boundary between work and home by digital technology creating permanent connection and resultant expectations of instantaneous communication (Derks and Bakker, 2012; Diaz *et al.*, 2012).

Importantly from an employment equalities perspective, Cohen and Gössling (2015) note that business travel is highly gendered, with more men travelling for work than women, with the implication that responsibility for domestic and caring activities reduces the willingness or possibility to engage with work involving long-distance travel. Other research has noted that having children is a significant factor in the creation of stress during business travel, which is compounded by age, with younger travellers experiencing greater stress from absence from their family (Espino *et al.*, 2002). More generally, stress-related psychological disorder rates were tripled among the spouses of business travellers when compared to non-business travellers (Dimberg *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, frequent business travel can negatively impact on the ability to maintain local social ties and friendship networks (Bergström, 2010). In exploring this darker side of hypermobility, Cohen and Gössling (2015) argued that not only do kin and social relationships suffer, but those who travel frequently are less able to participate in a range of place-based activities, thus affecting new and existing social networks.

In contextualizing the impact of absence, it is also important to consider exactly what a mobile worker is *missing* by being absent, and therefore the potential for digital technology to harness existing practices or create new ones. The Family Rituals 2.0 project was concerned with how absence impacts upon the many aspects of the mundane everydayness of family life, not just in the practical sense of servicing the domestic arena, but in giving meaning to being part of that set of familial relationships through the enactment of *family practices* (Morgan, 2011). It is within this social context the authors were interested in those activities that have very particular meanings for families that might be termed *family rituals*. Here the research draws on the debates of what constitutes ritual and ritual practice, and not only investigates how rituals reflect and re-affirm kinship relations, but also how they *actively contribute* to the articulation and creation of relations of care and affect. Thus, family rituals might well simply be the prosaic aspects of family life: meal times or visiting a particular place outside the home, as much as they might be the more profound, unique, or special activities linked to the sacred, to ceremony, and to rites of passage (e.g. coming of age, weddings, funerals, etc.) (Carsten, 2000; Sahlins, 2011). Thus, while the activity itself may be mundane, it is the *meaning* that is produced by all family members participating[ii] that defines it as a family ritual. In this respect, where one member of a family is absent from the everyday family rituals, it is the impact of this absence that is of interest in this paper, and the potential for digital technology to reconfigure this experience. Couples and families often deploy coping strategies to manage such absences and utilize communication technologies to create alternative ways of being together (Tang, 2012). The concept of imaginative travel provides a novel framing of the practices emerging with the deployment of digital technology to maintain at a relationships at-a-distance, to which the paper now turns.

Digital technology and imaginative travel

Digital technology has opened up a new dimension of imaginative travel through a range of expressive modes of virtual communication: text, talk, image, and video. Imaginative travel is explained as one of the 'mobilities which produce social life organised across distance' (Büscher and Urry, 2009, p. 101). Imaginative travel can include the sharing of the experience of a place, thus it is often discussed in relation to the tourist experience (e.g. Larsen, 2008) – with holiday photos opening a mental window to remembered places, and travel guides whisking people to far-flung locations through their descriptions of the exotic. Travellers, through sharing experiences online, also invite family and other travellers to journey with them, thus creating an imagined experience which may shape future travel choices (Germann Molz and Paris, 2015; Germann Molz, 2012). It has also been noted as supporting diasporic communities to retain their identity (Miller and Slater, 2000), become kinship networkers (Wilding 2006), and make choices about destination locations (Nedelcu, 2012). Likewise, mobile phones, Skype/FaceTime, blogs, social networking sites, and chat rooms have all become important to maintaining relationships with people that might be scattered across physical space (Larsen *et al.*, 2006; Stewart Titus, 2012).

Arguably such technologies and associated platforms (e.g. social media) afford social opportunities for experiencing at-a-distance – whether this be a particular location, a child's birthday party, an evening meal, or many other family activities – in a number of synchronous and asynchronous ways. Germann Molz and Paris (2015) argue that networked technologies create '*social* affordances' and shift the traveller experience to one that is globally connected. Connected travellers perform their travel experience through an array of digital media, as an interactive exchange of news and advice, and may even feel that connectivity enables them to *extend* their absence. Technology therefore offers a 'mooring' for the traveller. However, in the tourist context, travellers may seek to evade connection (Ibid).

Thus it is suggested that modern digital media and virtual connectivity have expanded the breadth of imaginative travel experiences, and that the experience of being transported 'elsewhere' through such media is now an integral part of everyday life (Urry, 2002). Previously, the tourism focus of imaginative travel was cast at odds to the 'everydayness' and banality of normal life – its creative aspect having been principally concerned with imagery of places far-flung and exciting. Larsen and Urry (2011: 1115) use the concept of the 'tourist gaze' to describe the visual (or, more broadly, sensory) enjoyment and consumption of places which are out of the ordinary to the traveller, and explain that gazing involves a range of experiences beyond merely the visual:

> "Gazing is not merely seeing, but involves physical movement through landscapes, cities and sights, aesthetic sensibility, connecting signs and their referents, daydreaming and mind travelling, and embodied practices capturing places and social relations photographically but also touching, smelling, and hearing objects of the gaze; and most

sightseeing involves some modes of listening, sometimes involving guides and even audio technologies such as head phones."

Modern ICTs can now afford a number of these elements of the tourist gaze or of 'doing tourism' to a person simply experiencing 'day-to-day life', and as-such the tourist gaze is no longer distinct from everyday life (Larsen, 2008). It is now possible to see and experience many of the objects of the traditional tourist gaze without leaving one's own home (Urry, 2002). The result of this technological affordance is that the digital has blurred the relationship between 'home' and 'away' creating a more porous set of social and spatial relationships in a highly mobile world (Massey, 2005; Cohen *et al.* 2015). This digital porosity is indicative of understanding family practices as a set of relational flows of people, objects and information, both synchronous and asynchronous. To this end, family rituals are likely to incorporate and/or respond to such mobilities.

Research examining digital technology in the workplace mainly considers substituting travel itself (and as-such the desire or need for co-presence) with virtual interactions (Aguiléra *et al.*, 2012; Lyons, 2013). Less attention is paid to how digital technology might foster connection and cohesion with family when a mobile worker is travelling for work. Yet evidence indicates technology is used by mobile workers to manage the personal and social parts of their mobile lives when they are away from their home, their friends, and their family, and, in particular, re-creating a *sense of home* when away (Van der Klis and Karsten 2009; Nowicka 2007). The digital practices of migrant communities – notably parenting at-a-distance – are illustrative of how growth in digital connectivity (home and away) has the potential to sustain familial and intimate relationships where absence is for an extended duration (Madianou, 2012),. However, as Madianou (2012) demonstrates, virtual connectivity can have a mixed reception: conflicts and problems can have greater visibility. Imagined travel back home is likely to be a complex experience, potentially having a different nuance to imagined travel in a tourist context.

In the context of mobile working it is generally accepted that digital resources are a positive development for managing absence; regular and quality communication is important for the psychological wellbeing of people who are away from their homes and loved ones (Greene *et al.*, 2010). Van der Klis and Karsten (2009) identified three distinct dimensions to this experience of 'making home' whilst away: (i) the material dimension, (ii) the activity patterns dimension, and (iii) the social dimension. Mobile technologies can be seen to intersect with all of these, being physical objects which help to fill and familiarise space, activity-related objects which play a part in maintaining familiar activity routines, and social objects which enable a level of connection with family and friends. However, this shift in the *quality* of the communication that is possible at a distance, and the increased sense of connection that it provides to loved ones, can also create a deeper sense of loss or absence whilst away, and can even be damaging at times when difficult family or social situations are

played out at a distance. In these cases, the sense of *being there but not being there* can be psychologically harmful (Greene *et al.*, 2010).

To summarise, studies of migrants and transnational communities demonstrate a high level of communication and participation in family life which is dependent on a range of digital media. Likewise, a number studies of mobile workers suggest similar themes. Sharing life online with family members focuses the absent worker joining in on ordinary activities such as playing with children or helping with homework (Madianou, 2012). This supports the idea that there are many mundane activities within family life which absence reconfigures or disrupts, and digital technology can afford a new type of participation for the absent party, as well as those back home. Thus, imaginative travel here might be about stepping into an imagined scenario of family life (e.g. reading to a child at bedtime), or more observational as in Madianou's research. At the same time, those at home may also step into the world of the mobile worker (or migrant) and see something of their life too (Nedelcu, 2012). Benson (2011) has described how migrants' expectations of mobility are related to their perceptions of the success of their new lives, and it is possible that imaginative mobility through digital technology is now a part of that expectation.

This research has identified three main types of communication between the mobile worker and family members: (i) *checking in*, (ii) *maintaining relationships/providing care*, and (iii) *sharing experiences.* In this paper we focus on the second and third points to explore imaginative travel, developing the concept to examine how the mobile worker can be part of family life at a distance, and how family members have the opportunity to open a window into the worker's experience through digital media. While the concept of imaginative travel appears generally shaped around the concept of being transported *away,* the notion of an 'everyday' experience of imaginative travel through digital technology creates a situation in which the mobile worker might be *transported home* via the same means – catching a digital glimpse of home life through the window of technology. This paper questions in particular what the implications of imaginative travel through digital technology are for a mobile worker seeking to connect back in to an everyday experience of home and family life. It is focused on mobile working as a practice that may create shorter or longer absences, but may be contextually different to those experiences of migrants. It will interrogate to relationship between family, absence, and digital technology from the perspective of experiences of virtual presence and imaginative travel.

Methodology

To gain a depth understanding of family life and the impact of work-related travel this research utilised a qualitative approach with mobile workers, and also (where possible) with family members. Recognising the multiple constructs of family in contemporary Britain, and a need to capture across a range of ages, in the

information given to potential participants we defined 'family' as a significant other that could be a parent, partner, child, or another person, so family was self-defined by the participant. The rationale for living with at least one 'significant other' being that we wanted explore how absence was experienced and managed. In terms of what constituted 'mobile working' we provided an arbitrary minimum of six or more overnight trips per year, or fewer with a significant duration (e.g. several months or the whole year) to potential participants.

Family Rituals 2.0 was a collaborative project with academics in the field of design. Inspired by our colleagues use of 'cultural probes' (Gaver *et al.*, 1999) and building on experiences from diary-interview studies (Susilo *et al.*, 2012), the research team sought a method to prompt reflection and consideration about activities that were considered important by family members (adult and child) and potentially affected by absence. The research approach therefore, was to introduce the project through an interview with the mobile worker, and if in agreement, an 'activity log book' was taken home for family members to contribute to. A second interview took place with the mobile worker together with nominated family members (which could include children) in which selected activities were discussed.

The interviews with the mobile worker focussed on understanding their work and work-related mobility, their family structure, which family activities held significant meanings for them, the ways in which they experienced absence from family, and the ways in which they utilised technology to stay in touch with family at-a-distance. The second interview with the family explored similar issues, but the discussion was focused through the activities recorded. Specifically, the second interview wanted to explore how the families' experiences of absence compared to those of the mobile worker. Not all families had completed the activity log, so the interview schedule was adapted to suit in these instances.

Recruitment and interview timing was the biggest challenge, as mobile workers are often busy people and having to take trips at short notice. As a project we had also made a commitment to include a range of professions/social class, but despite significant efforts to recruit people from sectors such as road haulage, we had a slightly less diverse sample than desired. Participants were recruited through employers involved in an earlier part of the research (see: Ladkin *et al.*, 2016, 2017), social network contact, adverts placed on websites such as 'Netmums', and press releases put out by the participating universities. There was some indication that involving family members may have put off some potential participants. However, the sample of 22 mobile workers (and 11 family interviews) included 7 females and 15 males, who were employed in a range of employment types with varying travel patterns, and had a range of family contexts (see Table 1). Not all mobile workers were able to engage us with their families due to their mobility patterns, and available time. Some interviews with mobile workers were conducted by Skype or phone, again to fit in with the availability of the worker; the rest were conducted face to face. All 'family' interviews were conducted face to face in the home.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a thematic approach was used for data coding and analysis (e.g. Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001). The thematic analysis was conducted using the NVivo software package. A set of initial starting themes were identified from the existing literature and a previous phase of the Family Rituals 2.0 project, which had explored these issues from the employers' perspectives (see: Ladkin *et al.,* 2016, 2017). The initial set of broad themes against which the data were coded were:

- Mobility/absence patterns
- Family life and rituals
- "Work"/"Life" boundaries
- Mobile working: pros and cons
- Technology and communications

From this starting set of themes, the analysis then followed an inductive approach to new themes and subthemes, which were identified during the coding process. This coding process was iterative, to account for this inductive approach. Examples of subsequent (sub)themes that were identified include:

- What mobile workers do while away
- Travel, absence, and return
- Re-integration issues
- Missing out (or not missing)
- Imaginings
- Coping Strategies
- Problems with technology

Participants' anonymity has been protected, and pseudonyms have been used throughout this analysis.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

MW name	Gender	Frequency away[iii]	Employment sector	Partner's Name	Family Int.	Family Characteristics
Adam	Male	>12	Consultant	Alice	No	P + C[iv]
Brenda	Female	>150	Other	Ben	No	P + C
Colin	Male	>100	Consultant	Claire	Yes	P + C
Dee	Female	Frequent	NGO	David	Yes	Partner only
Esme	Female	~10-20	Consultant	Edmund	Yes	Partner only

MW name	Gender	Frequency away[iii]	Employment sector	Partner's Name	Family Int.	Family Characteristics
Freddy	Male	~50-100	Consultant	Freya	Yes	P + C
George	Male	Frequent	NGO	Gloria	Yes	P + C
Harry	Male	Weekends	Training	Helen	Yes	Partner only
Ian	Male	~40-120	Flight crew	Isobel	Yes	P + C
John	Male	>150	Tech. advisor	Judith	No	Partner only
Leon	Male	~40-120	Academic	Lisa	No	Partner only
Kevin	Male	~3-4	Journalist	-	No	Children only
Max	Male	~10-20	Sales	Moira	No	P + C
Nicola	Female	1 week in 6	NGO	Nathalie	Yes	Partner only
Oliver	Male	>50	Academic	Orla	No	P + C
Paul	Male	>150	Oil industry	Patricia	No	P + C
Rose	Female	~12	Law	Robert	Yes	P + C
Steve	Male	Longer trips	Publishing	Sally (mother)	Yes	Other Combination
Tracy	Female	6-12 months	NGO	n/a	No	Living alone
Ursula	Female	Frequent	Training Consultant	Umair	No	P + C
Victor	Male	14 days on/off	Mechanical engineer	Veronica	No	Partner only
William	Male	Frequent	Flight crew	Wendy	Yes	Partner only

Identifying Family Rituals

Before thinking about imaginative travel back to home, this part of the paper considers how participants constructed activities at home, and how some of these might be conceptualised as 'family rituals' as opposed to simply 'routine activities'. Earlier we have noted that family rituals are those activities that hold meaning for the family members involved, where being there together is important (Morgan, 2011; Carsten, 2000; Sahlins, 2011). In this context very routine activities like collectively watching a DVD can take on a more significant meaning creating a ritualised event. These activities or family rituals are not necessarily confined to the home, as family practices are enacted across multiple spaces (Hollingsworth, 2013). Thus, part of the research investigated what were the activities that formed part of family life and why they took on a significant meaning. These types of activities discussed are set out in Table 2.

Table 2 Activities identified during interviews as significant

Everyday life	Specific activities	"Special occasions"	Religious
Eating and drinking at home and/or out	Sports and games	Family holidays	Attending church
Bedtimes	Social dancing	Birthdays	Christmas/Easter
'Flopping' on the sofa	Walks	Days out	
Watching TV/DVD or listening to the radio	Cycle rides	Anniversaries	
Shopping		Festivals	
Reading with children			

These rituals all helped to inscribe some meaning to the family unit. All of the activities described by families were important to them to a greater or lesser degree; a number of these activities were particularly prevalent in families' discussions, and formed a central part of the experience of family life together. Particularly common examples of these were: (i) activities related to food and drink, (ii) couples' activities (particularly for those families without children), and (iii) the 'everyday activities' of the household – which were often ascribed significant meaning.

These rituals were important to the participant families, and the evident importance of ritual to the social cohesion of the family unit raises a question as-to what happens when the mobile worker is absent from these when they must travel away from home for work. In what (if any) ways is the physical absence of a family member from a family ritual experienced, negotiated, managed, and/or compensated for? The following sections address this question through an analysis of the data on family rituals in the context of the mobile worker's absence and the families' use of digital technology to stay connected at-a-distance.

Glimpsing into home

Imaginative travel was facilitated primarily by digital technology. What was used and how it was used depended on personal preference, technology available (including stable Wi-Fi connections and appropriate bandwidth), and other social and temporal constraints upon the mobile worker and the other family members. These constraints included time-zone differences, work and family schedules, and the availability of a stable (and affordable) Wi-Fi connection.

Virtual connectivity was important for both mobile workers and their families, and served to fulfil a range of functions. Communication with home was predominantly mediated through personal digital technology. The posted written word (letters and postcards) were rare. All mobile workers interviewed travelled with some form of ICT, and the main devices used by participants to make contact with home were: mobile phones, smartphones, laptop computers, and tablet computers. This relatively narrow set of technologies facilitated a somewhat broader range of different communication types, which are listed in table 3.

Table 3: Communication mechanisms deployed

Synchronous communication	Asynchronous communication
Phone-calls Skype (video calling) FaceTime (video calling)	Text messages Emails Facebook Snapchat (image sharing) WhatsApp Postcards

What is interesting (and revealed in some of the quotes in this section) is that the high portability of some digital technologies is enabling a sense of 'stepping in

and out of the room' – as Ursula (a mobile worker) described it. A number of participants talked about the flexibility of a tablet/iPad to be carried around the house or to give panoramic insights into the hotel or meeting room for those back home.

> "We Skype, mainly in the house, I would call them. You can see what they are doing so they can show you things they've made or drawn or pictures or something, something they can show you, so take the iPad around the house and show you things. (…) When you are away, especially for a couple of nights, more than one night, so if you haven't spoken to them you want to be able to… you know being in the hotel in a random place and it is nice to kind of see how everyone is doing and chat to them."

(Ian (worker) – Family interview)

Other asynchronous communication services such as 'Snapchat' enabled participants to share photos in a way which produced a sharable experience based on intimacy and affect. A number of participants described such experiences of imaginative travel as akin to little 'glimpses' of home facilitated through photo or text messaging. These glimpses – whilst fleeting – could be imbued with significant meaning for the mobile workers, and served to make them feel more connected to home – as Freddy explained:

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

(Freddy – Mobile worker interview)

These digital glimpses of home provided the mobile workers with a way to access home life at-a-distance, and this raised the question of the degree to which these glimpses are a passive or active experience in terms of the opportunity they provide for interactions with family and life at home.

To explore this, the interviews prompted mobile workers to consider how family rituals were affected by work-related absence. Max illustrates how this can be the seemingly inconsequential 'stuff' that may be taken for granted:

> "Going to X location to watch football with A and B[sic]… It is quite mundane and everyday but it's those things that I miss a lot. And we don't do hugely exciting stuff, we are not into mountain bike riding or hand gliding or anything – yachting or anything like that, we don't do that sort of thing. But it is that 'everydayness' of walking round a

> supermarket together and having a laugh about what's on the shelves. It is really that simple."

(Max– Mobile worker interview)

However it is these small mundane routines that become ritualised within family practices that need to be considered in terms of exploring how these might be core elements of 'imagined travel'. This richness of the mundane mediated by digital technology was identifiable in the way that migrants also participate in home life through digital media (Madianou, 2012, Nedelcu, 2012).

While Madianou (2012) describes Filipino migrants sometimes leaving the webcam on to just watch this ordinariness play out, mobile workers in this research open and close the window on home for much shorter time frames, in a number of different ways and utilizing different media. This has given rise to the concept of mobile workers 'glimpsing in'[iv] on life back home, or allowing glimpses into their mobile life from home.

This does not mean to say that more significant but less frequent events are overshadowed by the mundane. A number of participants mentioned the special importance of being home for Christmas, for instance, either for themselves (as Tracey describes below) or for their family.

> "It surprised me, in a way, over Christmas, how much I did miss, you know, everything that goes on around Christmas with the family and getting everyone together and those sort of rituals I suppose that we have at that time of year. And I was sitting in the office, actually, on Christmas Day in Laos, with my colleagues, working, and I really just wanted to be back home at that point in time and see everyone."

(Tracey – Mobile worker interview)

In this instance, technology and context prevented Tracey from taking part in the whole event at a distance through video (e.g. Skype or FaceTime), but she did however communicate through a phone call. Generally in face, digitally 'sitting in' on a significant event was not recalled in the same way compared to more everyday activities. However, John did explain how he managed gift giving for his partner's birthday while away.

> "If I knew I am going to be away for her birthday I'll put a birthday card and I will hide it, if I put it on the table then she knows, and I will just hide it there and she will be talking in the living room and I'll be talking to her and I said oh you need to look behind there, there's your birthday card."

(John – Mobile worker interview)

This example presented by John demonstrates how absence and digital connection can reconfigure practices around existing rituals. His imaginative travel in this instance is prepared and shaped in advance, with the knowledge of glimpsing back home at a particular moment in time through a synchronous video call.

It was usual for mobile workers to communicate for a longer period once or twice a day (where possible) whilst they were away. In contrast to 'checking in'[vi], these more in-depth conversations would often revolve around what had happened during the day, and could include the whole family. Thus, the imaginative travel here is the digitally drawing in of the absent worker in the playing out of mundane communication and activities. These longer communications had a number of aspects to them. Sometimes these were simply to share the events of the day and to spend a bit of time talking to one another:

> "I like to hear what Nathalie's been up to and how her day has gone, and if she's had difficult things how they've gone and equally I like to tell her about things that have gone well or if something has been a bit tricky. So there's that sort of emotional connection that it's nice to maintain and the sort of, the support element of a partnership where you listen and encourage and, you know a sort of sounding-board or feedback for the other person, you know put things into perspective, that sort of thing."

(Nicola – Mobile worker interview)

Rather than giving a digital tour in visual terms as with other forms of 'imaginative travel', Nicola shows how this glimpse into home life is an emotional and affective tour. However, it is reliant on his partner reviewing and summarising what she wants him to hear; and on her part, she is invited into a similar review of Nathalie's day. Thus the respective days are re-performed in a format that is shaped by the media and the time available.

Being able to talk for a longer period of time may be key to conveying the emotional aspects of relationship, yet even shorter calls can act as a facilitator for being together at-a-distance, which Gloria considered important for the cohesion of the whole family:

> "I really like it when George is away – even if it's just kind of a snatched two minutes where he's been in meetings, he's gone back to his hotel room, he's got a little bit of time before he goes out and meets colleagues again for drinks and dinner or whatever it is that he's doing – even in that short space of time I really like the fact that we're able to chat on speaker phone whether it's in the car or in the nursery have all four of us able to talk to all four of us, for me that's really important and I really like that."

(Gloria (partner) – Family interview)

Mobile technology here provides an immediacy and intimacy that is *spatially flexible* not only for the mobile worker, but also for those continuing the daily routines at home. Gloria can make or receive that call in any number of locations and the speaker phone in the car makes it more inclusive for other family members to participate. It also enables those who are away to continue supporting roles with tasks that can be undertaken at-a-distance, as well as providing emotional support.

This flexibility is particularly enabled by the portability of the communication tool – as mentioned earlier.

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

(Ursula – mobile worker interview)

Whilst connecting with home was generally seen as a positive thing, in contrast there were examples in which the *mediation* of communication through the idiosyncratic formats of different digital technologies created a less-than-ideal experience. The main issues with the experience were either the difficulty of conveying certain types of meaning (for example via text or phone call), or in the inability of digital technology to fully replicate all of the necessary communicative aspects of a co-present conversation. These could often lead to frustration, and create issues which would not necessarily have arisen if the conversations had been conducted in a co-present context:

> "I think the reality is when we converse normally face to face, I can tell him to shut up or... or just walk off if it's getting boring – and Harry can do the same. Obviously you can't do that on the phone, so all of those body language things don't work."

(Helen (partner) – Family interview)

Technology affords different forms interaction with significant others that may not always directly map onto existing face-to-face experiences. Mediated conversations through technology may demand a more careful positioning of tone and language as well as content, as Helen above notes. However, communication through asynchronous media (e.g. Snapchat) may evolve its own practices relating to what individuals feel can and should be shared through that specific medium.

Arguably, communication at a distance is shaped around an 'imagined reality' of how communication should be, in order to mitigate the assumed limitations of digital technologies.

'Imaginative travel' in this theme can be understood as a mediated re-entry into family life, and the continuation of particular roles (e.g. being 'present' for parenting activities such as bedtimes, or sharing experiences such as food/mealtimes) while physically absent. However, there are technological limitations to how these at-a-distance interactions play out, and experiences of imaginative travel mediated through technology were not without their potential downsides. Communicating through digital technology brings its own set of practices and meanings to family life with absence. The emotive nature of some of the more expressive forms of virtual communication could serve at times to increase a sense of loneliness – for example allowing the mobile worker to see home, whilst at the same time firmly reminding them that it was out of reach in their distant location, and *amplifying* the sense of absence rather than creating a sense of connectedness. Brenda explained how her daughter sometimes found more expressive communication such as video calling or even speaking on the phone difficult at times for this reason:

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

(Brenda – Mobile worker interview)

This finding suggests that there is significant subjectivity and contextuality inherent in communication through digital technology, and to the experiences of imaginative travel that these might create.

The destination tour

Digital glimpses into the seemingly *mundane* aspects of family life set up a binary relationship between home and away, in which – conceptually at least – away is seen to be much more exciting or exotic than home. In this respect, this connection between imaginative travel and corporeal travel taking individuals out of the everyday and into a space that opens up new challenges and experiences perhaps has driven this focus on the outgoing rather than the incoming movement. Talking with John about his experiences as a mobile worker demonstrated how home juxtaposes the mundane against the less-than-ordinary experience of business travel. However, John's representation of this spatial 'other' indicates that much of being away is in

reality often routine and unexciting too – a standard hotel or ubiquitous meeting room is the mundane of business travel. So it becomes interesting to see that the way in which John brings his partner into this mundane experience is to let her know about the very ordinary routine that is being played out – in a way he might not necessarily do if he were in an office back home; however in terms of demonstrating the exotic, luxury, or exciting there is more hesitancy. Yet at the same time he considers himself as the one 'doing activity', rather than his partner.

"And is that pictures of where you are staying to show her what you are up to?"

"It will be the most random things. I guess if I am being a little bit naughty I will show her how amazing the hotel is for once, rather than a Travel Inn, Travel Lodge. But yes I mean I have done that little cheeky thing where I take a picture of the view of [unclear] Bay and it's like "look at this". Or just stuff, like really boring stuff where I have set up the meeting room for a presentation, or send stuff like that. "Just about to get started, I'll call you afterwards, let's hope it goes okay" that kind of stuff. You do check in with the most mundane things that you would not do in day to day work. I would not be going "Oh I am just about to send an email, I'll catch you at lunchtime." So yes."

"And what does she send you, from home?"

"Cats, pictures of the cat sitting where I normally sit on the couch."

"Oh right."

"Going, oh, maybe a picture of something she made for dinner. She is more of the receiving end of that kind of stuff. I am the one doing the activity I guess, so…"

(John – Mobile worker interview; interviewer in bold)

In drawing in the partner or other family member into imaginative travel to join the mobile worker there is often a sense of guilt about showing off the better experiences and a need to show the setting is an ordinary activity too. Here the tension around the ability to escape the home setting and mundane family life can create a need for imaginative travel to be performed in particular ways. Imaginative travel from home to the mobile worker may therefore be controlled or manipulated in a similar way to the presentation of home life is to the absent worker. In some respects this ability to limit the window will be shaped by work practices excluding an observational other (e.g. partner or child) being virtually present during work time, thus the imaginative travel is more likely to be enacted in the leisure or tourist spaces encountered by the mobile worker.

Nicola demonstrates the desire to share the wider spatial experience through a visual medium, and as potential tourists sample images from websites and travel guides (Larsen, 2008).

> "A couple of weeks ago I was staying in [place] in you know up in the North East [of England], and I had a hotel that looked out over [the beach], and it was really lovely and you know I phoned Nathalie and said "it's a real shame you're not here and you can't see the beach and you'd love it". It was really pretty, so it's that you know, you want to share things, don't you, and sort of I suppose it would be nice for her sometimes to be there as well to share things."

(Nicola – Mobile worker interview)

Here the sharing of digital images or video would be one opportunity for sharing. In this instance, the experience of place was expressed orally by Nicola via a phone call. Esme also demonstrated the relationship between a shared corporeal travel experience and the potential for imaginative travel through recall when talking on the phone:

> "Edmund's coming out to London on Friday next week, and we're staying in the hotel that I stay in, and that will be brilliant because then he'll have stayed there and seen it properly, as well as sort of having had that remote connection."

(Esme – Mobile worker interview)

In this respect, an important aspect of some of the more recent digital technologies is their ability to facilitate more expressive forms of virtual communication through features such as video calling and digital picture sharing. The vast majority of communication between mobile workers and their families were via telephone call or text message; however a number of participants also discussed using video calling and photo messaging at certain times. Video calling and photo messaging were two digital technologies that created strong experiences of imaginative travel for participants. Through providing a visual aspect to the communication, families could be brought more fully into the mobile worker's experience:

> "Ian will – say for example he was in Paris – she'd [daughter had] been learning about Paris so he sent a message, (…) and said show our eldest daughter this, it's a picture of him in front of the Eiffel Tower and then I showed her that as soon as she got home. So he also might send pictures to me for the girls to look at as a kind of form of communication."

(Isobel (partner) – Family interview)

The concept of family sharing the experience through imaginative travel is something which was comforting to Esme, who explained the way in which it made her feel less lonely when she was absent from home:

> "I always show Edmund my hotel room, which somehow I suppose does help me as well. You know? It's like, you know, here's the bed and here's the door and here's the bathroom and it just feels like- for me it feels like I'm not alone. Of course I am alone but there's something quite- I don't know. That feels… Somehow that always makes me feel better."

(Esme – Mobile worker interview)

Esme's point of being alone is particular relevant to many mobile workers, in that there may be a void when time for 'life' arrives which cannot take advantage of normal types of activities (e.g. leisure). Thus, life becomes mediated through different mechanisms of sharing emotional and visual information in two directions.

For mobile workers, communication through digital technology enabled them to fulfil some of their normal social obligations that they would otherwise have been unable to do due to their absence. It is evident however that whilst the various communicative functions offered by digital technologies are used frequently by mobile workers and their, there are significant limitations to what is possible through technology.

Conclusions

This paper seeks to understand the experiences of mobile workers and their families in the context of communication through digital technology – with an emphasis on the concept of *imaginative travel* as providing the potential for a richer sense of virtual presence for people who are apart.

There are three main outcomes of this paper. First, our study presents the new concept of digital glimpses back into home, taking existing discourses of imaginative travel and turning the focus away from the exotic and instead towards the mundane – seeking to understand how the *everyday* experience of home and family life is transmitted, experienced, and shared at-a-distance. This paper has identified a number of important findings which illuminate the ways in which mobile workers can (or cannot) reengage in family life at-a-distance. Second, this paper has established the role of digital technology in supporting the familial social relationships of those who travel for work (as opposed to the more traditional focus on technology facilitating work relationships and activities). Third, this paper has identified and described how digital technologies are individually appropriated to suit the personal needs of mobile workers. A relatively small range of technologies enable engagement in a much

broader range of interpersonal interactions and family rituals – specific to a particular context. These three outcomes are expanded upon below.

The main focus in this paper has been on the ways in which people use digital technologies to reconnect when work takes them apart. Communication whilst absent is facilitated through a number of devices and services. The families in our study communicated for a range of reasons, but consistent across these was the notion of trying to create or recreate a sense of imagined (or virtual) 'being there'. For the mobile workers there was often a sense that they were 'stepping out' of family life, and so they felt the desire to demonstrate belonging and being with the family whilst absent. Mobile workers might feel guilty about their absence, or be made lonely by it; families similarly experienced the temporary loss of that member of the unit – either missing them whilst they were away, or experiencing the additional burden of managing the household with one person missing. Thus the reconnection, care giving, and socialising through imaginative travel back home was an essential part of maintaining a healthy family life, and thus work/life balance.

Digital technology was able to facilitate a level of social obligation for the mobile workers, and the findings suggest that families' communication whilst apart would often involve experiences of imaginative travel. For the families, the ability to communicate through expressive media such as video calling provided them with a more meaningful experience and appreciation of where the mobile worker was, and for some this gave a deeper sense of connection or virtual presence. For the mobile workers, technology was often described as providing 'digital glimpses' of home life and routine. In these cases, the direction of the imaginative travel was *reversed*, and as opposed to the family being transported to a place they had never physically seen, the mobile worker could be 'taken home' through those glimpses, and as a result home felt much closer than it had previously (before the availability of current technology).

Whilst the data demonstrated that experiences of imaginative travel often had a positive effect on a family's ability to connect in more meaningful ways, at the same time the limitations of technology were frequently acknowledged by both workers and their families. Digital glimpses brought people closer to one another; however, these glimpses were never a full representation of the experience of co-presence, and whilst often positive could also sometimes be profoundly dissatisfactory. In some cases, these could unintentionally lead to more negative experiences of absence – making the physical separation feel more pronounced, or creating frustration when technology failed to properly mediate connection.

It is evident that digital technologies are important for families in allowing them to connect with one another in more meaningful ways when they are apart because of work. Experiences of imaginative travel created through novel media can enrich the experience and give a greater sense of connection for both those who are at home and those who are away. At the same time technology is limited in its ability to replicate a sense of co-presence, and there remains a question as-to *how much more*

digital technologies can do in terms of improving experiences of absence for mobile workers and their families.

The findings presented in this paper have a number of significant implications in a world in which work is becoming increasingly mobile at the same time as our communicative technologies are becoming more powerful and expressive. The concept of digital glimpses can be useful in better understanding the experience of connecting back into the everyday rituals of home life in the digital age. We have shown that the challenges of mobile working can have real impacts upon the health and wellbeing of our mobile workers and their families, and that understanding these experiences and some of the digital kinship maintenance that families employ is crucial to minimising the negative social implications of mobile working, and to maximising its positive aspects.

Acknowledgements

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[i] This term was coined by Boden and Molotch (1994) and ideas developed by Urry (2002, 2007) in relation to the 'new mobilities paradigm'.

[ii] We are not suggesting here that all family members might participate willingly, nor that such ritualised activities are without tensions and confrontations.

[iii] Approximate number of nights per-year, unless stated otherwise

[iv] P + C – Parents and Children

[v] Our project partners at Newcastle University and the Royal College of Art simultaneously generated a similar finding from their ethnographic research, but called it 'peeping in'.

[vi] For example, informing of a safe arrival.