Digital and Family: methodological insights from entering the messy extended family

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The Study: an example of entering the messy family beyond the household

• Qualitative study of 5 self-defined three-generational families in order to explore the integration of personal communications technologies (PCT) into their consumption practices – door to family opened by a friend in each family

• 50 direct and 91 indirect participants across the 5 families - beyond households
Methodological insights

1) Taking a practice approach to enable a focus on the use of technology and its day-to-day impact across the family
2) Sampling and accessing the extended family
3) Data generation – general trials and tips
1) Taking a ‘material turn’

Growth in neo-material theories, such as Assemblage Theory (DeLanda 2006) and Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005, Law 2009) and Practice Theories (Ward 2005, Shove et al. 2012):

- Focus is on practice as entity and how that practice is performed including changes over time: balancing human, objects within practice
- Avoids the dominant, sovereign and expressive human-focus – not what they say (or remember) they do, rather investigating what they actually do (Martens 2012)

Can we as a generation just agree to raise our kids like kids again and not give them iPhones at age 7 and contour kits at age 12?

“Alright, you can go on your iPad for ten hours as a reward for being off it for five minutes”

Now that I’ve checked Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, it’s time to seize the day.
Four stage multi-method research design

**Stage One**
Researcher approached primary contact/friend who identified their view of the ‘core’ family and those members came together for an initial group meeting with the researcher.

**Stage Two**
The core family individually and separately undertook to keep a two week diary.

**Stage Three**
Post diary, auto-driven individual or group interviews were held with core family members to discuss the diaries and PCT records.

**Stage Four**
The core family interviews and diaries identified extended family members. Those willing to take part produced a one week diary and along with PCT records this auto-drove a follow up individual interview/group interviews.
2) Friendship and family access

Partial insider status (Chavez 2008): rapidly diversifying family network yet warmth and reflected trust due to family connection

Reciprocity/reflected trust: researcher/participant friend was both a burden and a benefit

Concerns that all a bit middle class, middle aged and similar were alleviated very quickly to unlock a range of circumstances, ages, locations...

Avoiding issues or ‘sacred places’ (Chavez 2008)?
Families: ‘slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct’ (Law 2004)

FAMILY 4:

- ADAM (Husband and 2 sons)
- CATHERINE (Boyfriend and 2 daughters)
- LISA (Boyfriend)
- LAURA
- EMMA
- ERIC
- JOAN
- MATT (Sister and husband)
- Don
- EDDIE
- HELEN (Parents and grandparents)
3) Data generation: trials and tips

- **Sequential research** across families: time, patience, potential confusion
- **Flexibility and compromise** in use of research methods (focus groups versus individuals), channels to suit individuals/families (Skype, mobile, landline, in person) AND the need to drop everything!
- **Diary flexibility**: electronic (Marchant and O’Donohoe 2014), structured, formal and complex versus basic and handwritten, personal and traditional BUT all enabled auto-driven interviews
- **Diary impossibility**: Accept it won’t be 100% accuracy (but cross referencing possible)
- **Diary timeframe**: keeping them motivated (1 versus 2 weeks)
- **PCT records**: emphasis on PERSONAL but some did reference during interviews
- **Ethical issues**: sensitive issues, researcher knowing more than individual, eg mental health issues, anonymity and confidentiality, reporting
Implications for research and methodology

• PCT was part of everyday practice in ALL extended families and across ALL generations so we need to be aware of this dynamic when researching FAMILY

• Silent voices: it is accepted that there were still those who did not take part or were excluded in this study but the research did venture towards the ‘fringes and edges of our focus’ on family (Maclaren & Hogg 2009, p.1)

The way forward?
Family research should use methodologies which solicit accounts of wider family engagement to gain a fuller understanding of family consumption practices including taking into account the role of PCT in families as technology creates a ‘new version of us’ (Miller 2012)