“Letting them know, thinking of them, loving them”: family and friend relationships in the real & virtual worlds

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The study

- Personal Communities of women in ‘midlife’ – in their 50s
- 31 interviews in Swindon between June & October 2013
- White, heterosexual women
- Life history data
- ‘Important people’ – kin & friends
- ‘Mapping’ ‘important people’
  - Ages, how met, where they live?
  - The relationship?
  - How they keep in touch?
  - What shared activities?
- Ideas of friendship
- Who would you turn to?
Digital ICTs: important characteristics

- **Mobile** – travels with individual – phoning, texting (*mobile phone & smartphone, tablet [WhatsApp]*) – emails, Facebook, Skype (*smartphone, tablet*)

- **Asynchronous** – voice message, text, email, Facebook (*mobile phone & smartphone, tablet*)

- **Relatively cheap** – especially texting
Family: What sort of family?

- **Core family** – parents, husband/partner, children & grandchildren
- 3 types of personal community (see handout)
  - **Mainly core family** – core family > 50% members; few friends [6 women]
  - **Mainly family** – 1.3rd core; 1/3rd other family; 1/3rd friends [10 women]
  - **Friends & Family** – core – 20/30%; other family – 15/20%; friends > 50% [15 women]
Percentage of women using each type of ICT by type of personal community.
Personal community types and ICT use

- **Phones** and **texting** most frequently used digital ICTs in *all* types of personal community

- Major differences are in *who* is contacted not *how*

- Choice of ICT reflects socio-economic contexts & discourses though which they are understood
So email for me is a business thing, not a personal thing… (Agatha, Mainly Core)

People can take offense or get the wrong end of the stick via e-mail (Veronica, Friends and Family)

Facebook is evil! (Alison, Friends and Family)

Like I say all these nieces and great nieces and people, they’re quite happy for me to be their friend on Facebook and I see all the pictures of the babies and cute babies (Alex, Mainly Family)

(Sister), I will obviously email to Australia but we’ve now got an iPad and we can do that Facetime […] we’ve just started that which is great (Tracy, Mainly Family)

We Skype for her (stepdaughter) and her daughter and obviously Ralph, her husband as well, so that tends to be a weekly Skype we do with them (Rachel, Family and Friends)
Meetings still matter

- But to me, once again, texts, emails and phoning is a business thing, there’s nothing like a hug and to talk to somebody, to give them some tea or food, that is just lovely and you can’t replace that you know (Agatha, Mainly Core)

- Well you can’t interact properly unless you speak to someone face-to-face, you know you really need that eye contact and the facial expressions and all that […] I like that personal contact (Gillian, Mainly Family)

- I like the physicality, I like to cuddle my friends and you know and actually see them and you pick up so much more (Phoebe, F & F)
What relationship work is done with phones & texting?

4 Ps
Planning, Pats, Postcards/Pictures, Precautionary monitoring
Planning: contacts and tasks

- We *text to simply say, you know, can you give me a ring, or you know, when are you next available*, or whatever. (Kelly, Friends and Family)

- Q: how do set things up with [daughter] for example? *Phone [...] mobile mostly, the same with [son] [...] messages sometimes take a while to get through, you don’t know if they’ve received them* (Monica, Mainly Core)

- So if I need, say if I wanted *owt coming from the shop on his way home*, *I would send him a message on Facebook, pick up so and so for my baking* (Sally, Mainly Family)
Signalling ‘caring about’

Yeah, just generally keeping in touch, just letting them know, thinking of them, loving them, hope the kids are OK, just general chitchat really (Eleanor, Mainly Family)

I text my daughter a lot of things, like don’t forget this, don’t forget that, don’t forget the other (Alex, Mainly Family)

Because we tend to see them at weekends, or I see my daughter in the week when we go to keep fit or things like that, [...] but in the week I will text them or they’ll text me with rubbish really! [...] It’s just ‘I’m here, you’re there’” (Charlotte, Friends and Family)
We occasionally exchange emails, so he’s (brother) just gone to France and sent me a picture of them all on the Ferry (Kelly, Friends and Family).

But I don’t reply on it [Facebook], I just look you know, all what my family are saying and family up in London, you know, looking at their pictures [...] like extended family you know (Harriet, Mainly Family).

I mean [sister] has a daughter of 26 who has just given birth to her child [...] and I got a picture of her on my mobile [...] but we don’t perhaps speak to each other for three, six, nine months apart (Nicola, Mainly Core).
Precautionary monitoring

- I ring in the morning, hello Mum are you alright? Or she’ll phone me and say are you alright? (Monica, Mainly Core)

- Mum, I will speak to Mum on the phone every day if I don’t go up there, or I’ll ring and say I’m coming up now or whatever […] So even though we do face to face virtually every day, or if not every other day, it’s phone every day for whatever reason, just to make sure she’s alright (Veronica, Mainly Family)

- I visit her [mother] maybe every month because it’s a couple of hours and my car’s got a really high fuel consumption […] every day we talk on the phone Q. On the landline? No we don’t have a landline […] I’ve got a mobile with lots of minutes (Isobel, Friends and Family)
Contacts in different personal communities
Case study: Mainly Core Family

- **Agatha** – only child, divorced, re-married, 1 daughter & 1 grandchild; she listed 0 friends, 2 core family, 2 non-core family. Partner relied on for all support and is prime person for her to support.

- She **texts** her daughter about 1 in every 3 weeks and meets her and phones ‘occasionally’

- Talks on the **phone** to her stepdaughter ‘occasionally’ and meets her c 1 every couple of months

- Facilitates her husband’s visits to his father – 2/3 days a week
Case Study: Mainly Family

- **Tracy** - married, 2 children; 1 grandchild; she listed 5 core family, 6 non-core family, 5 friends.

- She **phones** her children and her dad most days, and **Facetimes** her daughter & grandchild 1/week; she sees her dad 2/3 times a week and her children several times a month; she cares for her grand-daughter 2 afternoons a week.

- She meets one sister 1 x month and **texts** and **phones** 3 other siblings and a sister-in-law each monthly

- She **texts** 1 friend daily and meets with friends c 7 times a month and also **emails** and **texts** them
Case study: Family and Friends

- **Charlotte** – married, 2 children, 2 grandchildren; she listed 3 core family, 5 non-core family, 9 friends.
- Texts her children **several times a week** and sees them and grandchildren on many weekends;
- Meets with one of two cousins or her aunt 1/month; she phones or texts the cousins and phones & writes to her aunt; she phones her sister every fortnight and texts as well. Sees her 3-4 times a year, for a weekend or shared holiday
- She will see 3 or 4 of her friends every month and phones and texts each friend 1 or 2 times a month
Case study: Family and Friends

- **Rachel** – only child, no children, divorced, re-married with step-children; she listed 1 core family (husband), 6 non-core family, 11 friends, plus a dog.

- She & partner **skype** one stepdaughter 1/month, and meet her and her children 2-3 times a month; she has a **phone** call or meets with her other stepdaughter less often.

- She sees a friend 4 or 5 times a week; **phones** and **emails** a friend 2 times a month; she has 2 friends who live about 5 hours drive away who she sees about twice a year for two-day visits.
Concluding points: ICT use and family relations amongst women in ‘midlife’

- ICT increases contacts – pats & postcards – and not only with those living at a distance
- ICT facilitates meetings & tasks – planning – with local and distant family
- ICT important to intergenerational contacts – precautionary monitoring, pats, postcards
- Desire to keep in touch with children/younger relatives important motivator for & help with ICT use
- *Friends* matter– high proportion age peers. They help with *family* relationships; source of sociability, identity apart from family and emotional/practical support
Concluding points: ICT use and family relations amongst women in ‘midlife’

- ICT creates new norms of contact – increased obligation to ‘be in touch’ frequently?
- ICTs don’t change people’s propensity to express care for others or to be sociable – they allow its expression in new ways
- Personal Community type affects how many family members and friends someone is in touch with - not their use of particular ICTs
- No evidence that ICT use reduces face-to-face meetings

As yet, new ICTs have not *fundamentally* changed practices of intimacy within these women’s personal communities – although they have intensified contacts.