

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

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# The study

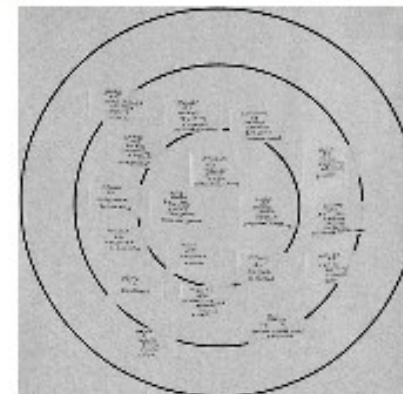


The Leverhulme Trust



Area 1

- 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?



Area 2



# 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** – 1.3<sup>rd</sup> core; 1/3<sup>rd</sup> other family; 1/3<sup>rd</sup> 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 cutesie 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

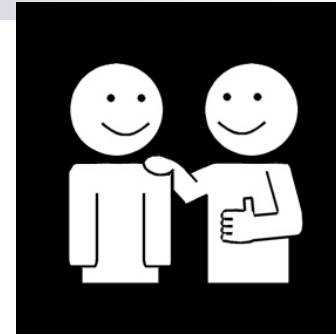
Planning, Pats, Postcards/Pictures,  
Precautionary monitoring

# 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)

# Pats



## ■ 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)*

# Postcards & Pictures




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