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Refamilisation in the broadband society – the effects of ICTs on family solidarity in Finland

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ABSTRACT
In this article we explore the effects that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) have on family relations in Finland. The idea of 'new connectivities' works as a starting point for the study directing attention to ICT-mediated forms of being together with distant family members. The research data consists of 22 student reports encompassing a total of 133 informants from extended Finnish families. Extended group interview (EGI) technique was developed and used for data collection in order to grasp the underlying social practices and values behind the use of ICTs in extended families. The results show that new ICTs, especially mobile social media, enhance family solidarity among family members who do not live in the same household. The concept of 'refamilisation' is introduced to encapsulate the diverse effects of new ICTs such as democratization of the family, rise of proxy persons, intensification, and compartmentalization of family communication on family solidarity.

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Introduction

The rise of information and communication technology (ICT), especially new social mobile media, has mediated and altered family relations (Cabalquinto, 2017a, 2017b; Clark, 2013; Livingstone, Mascheroni, Dreier, Chaudron, & Lagae, 2015; Neustaedter, Harrison, & Sellen, 2013) by introducing new tools of communication available to all family members.

Nevertheless, the question remains how these new tools are distributed in the context of family and whether they actually contribute to the sense of belonging characteristic to family solidarity. Hence, in this article we ask what kind of effects new ICTs, ranging from personal communication devices to social media applications, have on family relations in Finland. Additionally, we examine the interplay between ICTs and structural elements of family life. Our analysis is based on 22 interviews within Finnish families, encompassing a total of 133 informants.

Daatland and Herlofson (2003) define family solidarity as 'the felt obligations towards children and parents'. In this research family solidarity is a multi-faceted concept

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employed in order to highlight the positive and counter-productive aspects of 'belonging' associated with family life and consequently family solidarity in the broadband society (about the concept, see Fortunati, Vincent, Gebhardt, Petrovcic, & Vershinskaya, 2010). Family norms and solidarity cannot be regarded as absolute rules defining the lives of all families, but rather as guidelines that take new forms from situation to situation under given social conditions (Finch & Mason, 1993). Instead of studying how ICT use is associated with particular forms of solidarity (also see Bengtson & Roberts, 1991), this article explores and clarifies what are the daily situations and social conditions that make ICTs significant in terms of family solidarity (Baldassar, Nedelcu, Merla, & Wilding, 2016). While working to this end, the analysis is firmly anchored on a grassroots level data, which leads us to contemplate the studied phenomenon through the concept of refamilisation. Borrowing from social policy and family research (see Leira, 2002) where it highlights the shift in care responsibilities from the state back to the family and hence also calls for intergenerational family solidarity.

As little as a decade ago it was widely considered that one-to-one communication tools, such as mobile telephone calls, text-messages and emails, were especially useful in integrating the spatially and temporarily separated daily agendas of individuals. Consequently, it was argued that the individual had become the primary unit of household connectivity, replacing traditional family solidarities based on shared values and norms (Kennedy & Wellman, 2007). It was also suspected that the Internet and mobile phone would have led to increased social isolation and a decline in the average size and diversity of core social networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006).

More recently, not least because of social media, scholars have questioned these results, showing that those who use the Internet and specific forms of social media such as photo sharing and instant messaging have more extensive and diverse core networks than those who do not (Hampton, Sessions, & Her, 2011; Lam, 2013). While the rise of social media inspired much research on social networks and group-based communication (e.g. Ling & Lai, 2016; Neustaedter et al., 2013), this article argues that family solidarities have been subject to many significant changes as well.

New forms of family connectivities

Contemporary ICTs have not only fostered individual networking and added to the 'privatization of communication', they have also made possible the maintenance of – and sometimes intensified – family and other core ties. Mesch (2006) summarizes the effects of ICT's families, mentioning positive effects such as the possibility for collaborative use, better coordination of family activities, and distance parenting. The negative effects were seen to accrue from family members solitary use of ICTs (watching or playing videos alone), which was considered to detract from time spent together within the family (Nie, 2001; Nie & Hillygus, 2002). This in turn diminishes time spent together, which is regarded as a precondition for a sense of 'togetherness' in the family.

Relating to the potential risks of solitary use of technologies, many studies have investigated parenting styles and parental mediation in relations to children's use of ICTs (Clark, 2013; Lee, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2015; Mesch, 2009; Shepherd, Arnold, & Gibbs, 2006). Despite the merits of these studies, existing literature about the impact of computer technologies on the family is still surprisingly limited in scope. Most of

studies have focused on individual family members or family members residing in the same household. The only remarkably expectation is the migrants living in diasporic family relations (Cabalquinto, 2017a, 2017b; Madianou, 2016; Miller & Madianou, 2012). Considerably less is known about the use of ICTs in extended families whose members live in different locations around Finland – or in other developed Western countries – and stay in touch with one another by means of communication technologies. Following the example of Christensen's (2009), we think that the term *distributed family* describe this family type under investigation perhaps most accurately. Regarding ICT use in this type of families, Lam (2013, p. 323) presents that among Chinese migrant workers who maintain translocal relations with family and construct translocal identities, ICT use leads to 'a new form of intergenerational solidarity among the elderly parents and the young family members who are distant and cannot physically gather together for a long period of time'. These distant-but-intimate connections, Lam concludes, have made intergenerational relationships and family obligations more symmetrical and egalitarian. However, research has also pointed out that gender, age and social class differences sometimes translate into asymmetrical use of digital communication technologies, which in dispersed families create new social inequalities between family members (Cabalquinto, 2017a, 2017b).

This kind of new connectivity is commonly described using the term 'connected presence', which refers to the feeling of a perpetual connection that can be activated at any time (Licoppe, 2004). For connected presence, small gestures and communicative acts are as important elements as the content of communication or messages (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005). Regarding intra-family communication, Christensen (2009) notes that frequent mobile phone calls and text messages serve the feeling of closeness while members are physically separated. Additionally, with the rise of new social media, a variety of new simple modes of communication, such as pressing a 'Like' button in Facebook or in Twitter, have emerged which provide new means to nurture family solidity from a distance (Eranti & Lonkila, 2015). The significance of such small communication acts, for instance group messaging, has been mostly discussed in connection to peer-relations (e.g. Ling & Lai, 2016; O'Hara, Massimi, Harper, Rubens, & Morris, 2014). Lately, attention has been also paid to a variety of small ordinary communicative practices that serve the feeling of co-presence in transnational distributed families (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). Madianou and Miller (2012) have for example introduced the notion 'polymedia' to have a better grasp of this environment of multiple communication opportunities, and to address the social, emotional and moral consequences of choosing between them in the context of interpersonal and family communication.

Finland has some specific family features that shape the need and actual use of communication technologies in families. First, one-fifth of Finns live alone and approximately one-third of them live in two-person families. One reason for the high proportion of small families is that young people, who are entitled to universal public study and housing benefits, leave their childhood homes at a considerably young age. The share of 20–24 year-olds living in their parents' home declined for at least three decades, but has recently stabilized being at the level of 24 percent in 2014 (Statistics Finland, 2015). Secondly, the percentage of families with children has decreased from 64 in 1950 to 39 in 2014 (Statistics Finland, 2015). In contrast to many Southern European countries, multi-generational housing arrangements are almost non-existent in Finland. Thirdly, it is interesting to

note that face-to-face time with other family members has clearly dropped between 1999/2000 and 2009/2010 in Finnish families; this applies to all age groups including both men and women (Hanifi, 2015). All things considered, nuclear families in Finland divide relatively early into smaller units, contributing to the emergence of distributed families and making daily interactions increasingly reliant on either physical visits or – more commonly – on ICT-mediated family communication.

ICT-mediated family communication has not been studied very systematically in Finland. Punamäki, Wallenius, Hölttö, Nygård, and Rimpelä (2009) investigated the relationships between ICT usage, peer and parent relations in early adolescence. Regarding child–parent relations, they found that intensive ICT use for digital playing, Internet surfing, as well as for emailing and chatting, were related to poor child–parent relations. Hurme, Westerback, and Quadrello (2010) examined communication patterns between grandchildren and grandparents in Finland with two statistical surveys. The data collected from grandparents indicated that the further away grandchildren lived, the less landline, mobile and face-to-face contact there was. Only the exchange of letters and postcards with grandchildren increased with distance. Similarly, data collected from grandchildren showed that they used less text messaging with grandparents when the geographic distance between the two generations became greater.

Drawing on Finnish time-use surveys collected between 1979 and 2009/2010, Repo and Nätti (2015) maintain that young people (10–19 year-olds) use computers mostly alone in Finnish households. Internet use is also mentioned as a solitary activity among children. By contrast, watching television has remained as an activity that children do together with their family members more often than with their friends. All these previous accounts rely on relatively simple, unidimensional indicators of ICT use (time use, frequency). Other kinds of methods are required in order to clarify the reasons behind the use of various digital communication technologies in family communication, and to illuminate the positive and negative consequences of their different uses for family cohesion/solidarity (see also Christensen, 2009).

Research data

The research data consists of twenty-two (22) reports based on extended group interviews and observation. The reports were written by Finnish social sciences and communications studies students at the University of Jyväskylä between December 1024 and March 2015. The students' assignment was to observe ICT-related communication in their families and interview five (5) family members who use ICT. The total number of informants in this study is therefore 133 including the 22 key informants.

Nineteen (19) of the key informants were female and three (3) male. The age of the key informants varied between 20 and 38 although only two of them were in their thirties. There were 61 female and 50 male family members interviewed and observed by the key informants, meaning that women are slightly overrepresented in this research material. All families participating in the research were studied in the context of three generations including children, siblings, spouses, parents and grandparents that typically formed the immediate family of the key informants. Some key informants extended the interviews to their cousins, children and spouse's relatives. Geographically the key informants and informants represent all the major regions of Finland. Social class background

was not specifically inquired from the key informants. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the research data is skewed in this respect, as the children of highly educated parents are more likely to attend universities also in Finland (Kivinen, Hedman, & Kaipainen, 2012).

Based on their fieldwork, the key informants wrote a total of three (3) reports with a minimum of 300 words per report in which they were asked to describe: (1) what ICT tools and applications were used to stay in touch with family members, (2) how the key informants consider their ICT skills in relation to one another and finally (3) how ICT affects the roles within their family. ICT was defined as all kinds of digital communication tools and applications that are used to stay in contact and communicate with family members including mobile phones, e-mails, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

For comparative reasons the key informants were advised to interview at least one of their parents and one grandparent, if possible. The three remaining interviewees were freely determined by the key informants providing that they were of different ages. Key informants also gathered background information on each interviewee including gender, age, relationship with the key informant and whether the key informant and informant shared a household. Geographical distance was documented if the key informant and the informant were not members of the same household. Lastly, the method of interview used with different informants was reported.

Research methods and analysis

Students have good knowledge regarding the family relations and ICT skills within their families. Due to their educational background, they also possess the necessary tools to communicate their findings to the researcher in an unambiguous manner. Furthermore, as the students are part of the families they observe and interview, they are able to gain information that might not be accessible to an outside interviewer. In research focusing on generational relationships and family solidarity, this kind of collaboration is even more significant as it provides access to the experiences of not only the 22 key informants but their 111 family members as well.

The extended group interview (EGI) employed in this study is a qualitative research method that we have developed in order to better grasp the underlying social practices and values behind the use of ICTs in families. We have designed it to describe families and their relationships with various ICTs, but particularly to deepen our understanding of the changes ICTs have brought on family solidarity within the family. EGI also enabled us to reach a relatively large number of family members without compromising the quality of the observations and interviews. As a research method, EGI draws upon both new methodological aspirations regarding group interviews in the context of the family studies (Reczek, 2014) as well as the collaborative nature of the ethnographic enquiry (Lassiter, 2005).

By the term ‘extended’ in EGI, we wish to emphasis the scope of the research material: instead of the nuclear family, the group interviews conducted in this study consisted of three generations extending from grandchildren to grandparents. The second meaning attached to the concept of ‘extended’ highlights the methodological expansion of the notion of group interview developed in this research. The reports are based on a variety of interviews and observations conducted by the key informants including traditional

individual and group interviews as well as face-to-face and phone interviews. Furthermore, EGI and observation were not necessarily conducted at one specific time or place, but rather as a series of individual or group interviews in which family members described their everyday lives in the context of their weekly schedules and the social dynamics of their families. Instead of fixed on a specific time or place outside the family life (cf. focus group interview facilities), EGI goes wherever the key informants might go and thus expands the boundaries of traditional group interview.

Utilizing key informants as interviewers and observers added a strong collaborative element to the method as key informants worked side by side with researchers while gathering the research material. In numerous ethnographic studies (Lassiter, 2005; Lassiter & Campbell, 2010; Powdermaker, 1967; Rappaport, 2008), the equality between the researcher and the informant has consistently been reported as a positive element in the context of fieldwork. Equality enhances the quality of the research data by giving the informant, or in this case, the family unit, an opportunity to bring forward their 'own voice' in terms of ICT and family solidarity.

In addition to the interpretative distance (Geertz, 1973) characteristic of qualitative research in general, there is the element of physical distance to be accounted for in this research. Many of the family members participating in this study lived a significant distance, sometimes several hundred kilometres away from the key informants who have gathered the research data. In this light, using EGI and observation has enabled the key informants to adjust the data gathering according to their family situation and to employ the most convenient method of communication in order to reach their family members. In comparison with e.g. traditional group interview conducted by a researcher, EGI has also a considerable amount of reflexive capacity to it. EGI it gives room for the key informants to contemplate on the ICT use of their families during both observation and the actual interviews in collaboration with their family members but also later on when they write their reports.

The reports depict numerous occasions on which the family members disagreed with one another, indicating that the environment in which the interviews took place was considered safe enough for everyone to express their opinions regardless of gender or age. The key informants also demonstrated the necessary sensitivity towards their informants' opinions: even contradictory views on ICT use in families were carefully documented in the reports.

The fact that key informants gathered research data from their own families raises some methodological issues. While studying one's own family in many ways provides valuable access to information on family members, existing preconceptions can follow key informants through their fieldwork and find their way into the reports. However, in ethnographic terms the process of interpretation is by necessity always invested with various biases, as human perception in general is subjective by nature (Clifford, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Marcus, 1998). The reports made by the key informants do not produce 'objective facts' but rather impartial truth, which are further interpreted by the researchers during the analysis in order to detect and make visible potential biases (Hänninen, 2012).

The research material was analyzed by using thematic analysis of coded research data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006), a commonly applied method in ethnography. At the first stage of examining the reports we focused on the question of how exactly ICT has affected family relations in Finland and discovered that the studied families consider these

effects mostly positive. At the second stage of our thematic analysis, we took a closer look at the central themes of the relationship between ICT and family solidarity. We concluded that there are several ways in which ICT enhances family solidarity and that despite of the positive effects associated with various ICTs, almost all of them included one or more counter-productive elements as well.

As regards research ethics, this study operates on informed consent (Miller & Bell, 2002; Seidman, 2013). All of the students and their family members were aware of the nature of the research and its aspirations. They also gave their permission to use the reports based on observation and interviews as research material. In order to ensure the privacy of the key informants and interviewees, all names appearing in this study have been changed to pseudonyms.

Enhanced solidarity within Finnish families through ICTs

Interviewees participating in this study agreed on that ICTs, especially smartphones, have increased communication within their family. Although new technologies have partially replaced traditional ways of communication within the studied Finnish families, interviewees also reported that their interaction with other members of their families had become more diverse. ICTs provide multiple tools and modalities of communication (voice, text, photo, video etc.) to connect with one another, which has made it easier to find more convenient modes of communication that cater to the various needs of people in different life-situations and within different family structures. Consequently, it can be argued that ICTs have the potential to improve intra-family relations and family solidarity in Finland.

According to Laura, a key informant, the main reason people are willing to try out various new technologies and applications is that they provide family members opportunities to be available and to participate in family matters. New technologies are also appreciated because they make communication fast, easy and often free of charge and because of they proved usefulness in everyday life.

It can be argued that especially the younger interviewees have a tendency to choose the appropriate mode of communication according to the ICTs that they know their family members use frequently. Parents utilize Facebook and text messages while communicating to their children and other younger members of the family, and make phone calls to the older generations such as their parents or grandparents. Young people typically use WhatsApp and text messages (see also, Racz, Johnson, Bradshaw, & Cheng, 2017) or contact their family members in Facebook. If they want to be in touch with their grandparents, they too choose a phone call (Oksman, 2006).

There are also several examples available in the research data suggesting that in some families, instant messengers such as WhatsApp and Vine represent an important part of intra-family communication between children and their parents on a daily basis. In these families, almost everything from discussions regarding weekly schedules to sending funny pictures and asking how family members are doing is conducted through these applications. As Emilia describes her family's recently established WhatsApp group:

> It is a convenient way to reach the whole family when there is something that needs to be discussed with everybody. […] Nowadays all my family members are in Instagram too. We like each other's pictures there and sometimes even leave comments. […] It was only

> four years ago, when I moved away from home and didn't see my family every day, that there were considerably less communication in our family than now.

Members of the older generation prefer telephone to other ICTs (Oksman, 2006), as they often regard talking easier and faster than writing. It is also true that the older generation does not have the same repertoire of ICTs at their disposal. In this light, one could expect that the family solidarity between parents and grandparents and especially grandchildren and grandparents would suffer from this asymmetrical use of ICTs. According to our research data, however, this is not always the case as family members know it is best to call or text their grandparents in order to reach them (Christensen, 2009). The availability of other ICTs can thus enrich the communication with older generations, but it does not necessarily decrease it.

WhatsApp and other instant messaging services were frequently mentioned by interviewees as ICTs that do not necessarily have to convey 'important' information. According to the research data, such phatic communication[1] through 'unimportant' messages consist of asking how somebody is doing, sharing opinions, photos, video links and links to various websites, sending humorous messages, asking advice for small, even trivial problems and just 'hanging out' with one another. Sometimes family members just send updates on what they are currently doing – not because they think it is important to know – but because they want to be active or 'present' in their intra-family messaging group and contribute to the sense of belonging in a family (Cabalquinto, 2017a, 2017b; Christensen, 2009).

However, in terms of family solidarity it is obvious that the significance of these 'unimportant' messages and phatic expression in general is far from trivial. On the contrary, hanging out in Facebook, WhatsApp or Instagram creates a new kind of sociality among family groups by giving them flexible applications to communicate with each other in a manner that is not bound by time or a place and that is cost free and thus available for the majority of people (Baldassar et al., 2016). In fact, it is precisely in these fleeing moments of 'doing nothing special' that the essence of sociality and family solidarity emerges in the context of ICTs.

Computer-mediated phatic communication represents an important part of contemporary intra-family interaction. There are, however, also examples in the research material indicating that this kind of messaging is not considered as important as more informative content such as family schedules or parental advice. Furthermore, both younger and older generations argue that expressing emotions through ICT is not necessarily as simple as in face-to-face interaction or over the phone (although this too is possible in some cases), due to a reduction of social cues such as tone of voice and facial gestures (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984).

Additionally, ICTs provide an opportunity to reflect on one's reply and allow visual messages, which the interviewees frequently described as an enriching feature in their communication (Share, Williams, & Kerrins, 2017). Email and various forms of messaging can also help people discuss difficult subjects that would otherwise be avoided in a telephone conversation or a face-to-face meeting. Especially members of the younger generation find it sometimes awkward to speak over the phone, because they are used to the 'absent presence' (Gergen, 2002) of multi-tasking while using various applications. As Maria's younger teenage sister Lisa puts it: 'You can't be only halfway present during a phone call. Instead you have to constantly concentrate on what the other person is

telling you and come up with something to say in return.' Grandparents and other members of the older generation too regard visual aids such as pictures an important part of communication. They enjoy photographs sent by their children or grandchildren (Oksman, 2006) via email or as multi-media messages to their mobile phones even if they do not necessarily know how to reply to these messages.

Another benefit of ICTs for the family solidarity is that it is now relatively easy and inexpensive to keep in touch with relatives travelling or living abroad (Cabalquinto, 2017b; Share et al., 2017). When, for example Emma was studying abroad for one year, she skyped regularly with her mother, father and sister. Sometimes she even skyped with her two grandmothers, both of whom found the video connection something new and exotic. Email, WhatsApp and Facebook are commonly used to communicate with relatives when one wishes to avoid expensive long-distance phone calls. As Lucas points out, ICTs can also benefit face-to-face relationships within an extended, distributed family:

> My parents Anton and Linda surprised their daughter Hanna in December 2014 by visiting them in Switzerland without telling Hanna and her husband Tom about their trip in advance. This was possible because Hanna's son Ralf connected with his grandparents through Skype, which they used to buy plane tickets in order to get the surprise organized. I myself was on call with my mobile phone advising my father and mother how to do an online check-in at the airport.

In the above example, family solidarity was enhanced by using Skype and mobile phones for communication but also in order to create the possibility for in-person encounter. Ling and Yttri (2002) refer to this type *ad hoc* maintenance of social relations with the term 'micro-coordination'. The situation does not have to be as elaborate as was demonstrated in the quote above. People use ICTs to facilitate 'micro-coordination' all the time in their everyday lives by texting, messaging and calling to make appointments or setting up a meeting in a restaurant or at somebody's home.

If one takes a closer look at the family members with whom an individual person is actually in contact, it becomes apparent that the increase in communication does not necessarily include everyone. Especially the relationships between grandchildren, grandparent and great grandparents do not seem to benefit from ICTs in the same way as the relations between children and their parents and siblings.

ICTs as a source of disruption and compartmentalised communication

ICTs have enhanced family solidarity in many ways. This is clear from the positive qualities attached to ICTs by all three, occasionally even four generations within the family unit discussed in this article. There are, however, a number of negative effects arising from the interviews that shed new light on the impact ICTs have on the inner dynamics of the investigated families.

Using social media, playing games or checking emails are time-consuming activities that colonize a large number of the waking hours within the studied families. Many of the reports indicated that ICTs have reduced the frequency and quality of traditional social interaction between family members. These lines of observations were made especially by the older generations. As Emilia's grandfather, Aaron describes the 'olden days':

> People didn't have radios or computers. They used to gather somewhere in the woods and that was all the interaction you needed. One was able to just walk into a neighbours' house or visit somebody you didn't even know. One didn't have to make an appointment for it as you do today.

Emilia's grandfather thinks that the older generations could teach this spontaneous interaction to the younger generations that have born in the age of displays and screens. Simon agrees with Emilia's grandfather, stating that also the traditional social skills entailing face-to-face interaction within the family are important. Although spontaneous interaction does of course take place in social media as well, one is not continually immersed in it.

According to Maria's grandmother Tara, the frequent use of mobile phones has impoverished social interaction. Maria's mother Lydia, further adds that she has been contemplating 'continuous staring at the screen' as she puts it. She is especially worried about the lack of emotional expression, true conversation and building of intimacy in an era when being present with one another is in many ways difficult and people are constantly busy. Parents argued, that because of the ICTs it is especially challenging today to maintain a healthy amount of outdoor life and physical exercise or to teach children real life (IRL) social skills that do not involve ICTs.

Grandparents do not have same kind of practical hands-on relationship with ICTs possibly because they do not use ICTs as frequently as younger generations, but also because parents hold the greatest power over their children and their use of ICTs within a family unit. Parents participating in the interviews are divided on whether ICTs have explicitly changed family relations or not. Some interviewees found the excessive use of ICTs a transformative factor in itself, leading to family relations and interaction being diminished. On the other hand, in many instances informants did not regard ICTs as having an effect on the family relations and considered them merely a tool for intra-family communication.

In the environment of polymedia (Miller & Madianou, 2012), the fact that not everybody has the same ICTs (devices, software and applications) at their disposal can reduce communication between family members. This is true especially in the case of grandparents and other relatives outside the Finnish nuclear family. In some extended families the communication has stopped altogether due to asymmetrical means of communication. For persons who do not have a mobile phone, computer or tablet and who are not active in social media, it is possible that they can find themselves suffering from some degree of exclusion from the intra-family communication.

Exclusion from family relations is one of the largest problems family members mentioned when discussing the changes bestowed by ICT on the family communication. It was explicitly mentioned by 17 key informants and their families out of 22 in the reports. From a generational point of view, it is usually not the young people who suffer from this exclusion, but instead parents, grandparents and other older relatives. As Sofia described the new application based-distribution of communication within her family:

> My relationship with my sister Anna has improved considerably since we started using WhatsApp. We message each other every day and share photos about everything […] My parents and I call each other maybe four times a year and send some Facebook messages. Our relationship would be saved if they used WhatsApp as well. I don't like sharing anything in Facebook anymore because the only thing I get out of it are embarrassing comments from

> my relatives. Instagram is better, but then my parents [that do not use Instagram] wouldn't get to see the photos.

In addition to the exclusion and to the less social aspects of ICT, interviewees were also concerned about the shallow or indirect nature of ICT-assisted communication, for instance following relatives' Instagram accounts without commenting on them. As Benjamin's brother, Joel points out, if one does not pay close attention to the deep meaningful conversations that people used to have over the phone or by email can be outnumbered by funny multimedia messages and short micro-messages.

In summary, it seems that the different styles of communication between the younger and the older generation remain divided. In fact, while traditional means of communication through phone calls, text messages and email are diminishing within the younger generation, two separate 'realities' emerge from the world of ICTs that do not always support family solidarity in a way that could be expected in light of 'expansion of the communication'. It can be further argued that the more fluent one is with various ICTs within a family group, the more likely one is to maintain or to deepen family solidarity in general.

Family roles in transition

According to the majority of interviewees, various ICTs have a positive effect on their family life because they have made traditional social roles within a family more democratic. Especially the younger generation has gained a new kind of power within the family unit. Isabella's mother Ada maintained that there is no argument within the family about who knows best: children have better skills regarding ICTs. However, it does not matter if the 'egg is wiser than the hen' as she put it. Isabella's father Oliver agreed with his wife and added that 'it is only good that younger people give advice to their elders'.

It is frequently described by the interviewees that changing roles in the family, where children having 'a say' on the family matters is based on mutual trust and that children in many ways benefit from this upgrade as they feel themselves appreciated and needed by their parents. It is not uncommon in this atmosphere of mutual trust that the effects of the newly gained social status are transmitted to other areas of family life outside ICTs. This can be seen especially in the overall relationship between young people and their parents, which according to many interviewees has become less informal, humorous, and even chatty in the social media.

Nevertheless, in the context of changing roles within the family it is important to note that while ICTs have democratized family life by giving the younger generations a new kind of social status, in general terms Finnish family structures do not seem to have been affected by new media. Parents still hold their original position as the decision makers within the family. From a parental point of view, there are many elements in the upbringing and education of the children that still are – or they should be – allocated as parental responsibilities such as social skills and the development of moral judgment.

In addition to the educational relevance of family solidarity and ICTs, some parents described social media as a dangerous place in which especially younger children can encounter situations that they may not fully understand or be able to cope with such as bullying, buying things online, or sexual harassment (also Boyd, 2014; Clark, 2013).

From a parental point of view such situations can be frightening especially if parents feel that they cannot protect their children due to insufficient knowledge of certain phenomena in the social media, lack of access of to the applications in which their children are participating, or because they regard their ICT skills to be poor in general.

The relevance of the younger generations' good ICT skills for Finnish family life is considerable, since their assistance for many older relatives, whose threshold for experimenting with and adopting new technology is relatively high. Children and grandchildren have in many cases better knowledge regarding ICTs than their parents and grandparents thus, enabling them to act as the 'warm experts', described by Maria Bakardjieva (2005).

Warm experts are a kind of proxies or teachers who share their technological expertise with other members of the family (Dolničar, Hrast, Vehovar, & Petrovčič, 2013). Proxies may also facilitate others' participation in broadband society through the co-use of ICT devices or just by displaying the content of their own social media accounts to family members who may not personally use social media at all. This kind of help is commonly considered an integral part of family solidarity in Finland. A proxy can also be a person who inspires other family members to follow his or her life in the social media thus encouraging them to embrace new technologies and applications. Consequently, the proxy serves as a mediator for a certain segment of the older generation to keep up with the continuous development of these technologies. Proxies also benefit young children within the family unit who are taking their first steps in learning how to use ICTs.

The multiple ways of staying in touch with family members has to a certain extent made parenting easier than before ICTs. As Eva's mother Erica argues, she no longer has to be as worried as she used to because it is simple to reach everybody. She can now easily have a look on the Internet and see whether everything is 'normal', as she puts it. Eva's father Alex also frequently asks his wife to 'find out where the children are and how they are doing'.

Similarly, Maria's mother Lydia has created a Facebook account from which she can see her children's updates. Sometimes she uses Facebook Messenger to get in touch with a given family member. Lydia has also joined Instagram because she wants to 'follow' her children and see the photos they add first hand. At the same, however, it is important to acknowledge that ICTs can also reduce parental control of their children's lives especially if the children have better ICT skills than their parents. According to Laura's mother Paula:

> Social media has created 'a hole' which is no longer under the parents' control. Parent can't see what's going on in the hole in or their child's life, which makes controlling the child's life in an appropriate manner more difficult.

One common concern parents had over their diminishing power in the context of ICTs and family solidarity is that they are left out of their children's social lives since they do not have access to the social media used by younger generations.

Based on the available research material, we argue that the development of both the distribution of ICT skills and the overall democratization of communication within the studied Finnish families are important outcomes of new ICTs, and that this kind of transformation could have not taken place without the influence of the proxies. Operating on both technological and communicational levels, proxies play a vital role in keeping family members together in the broadband era.

Discussion and conclusions

The relevance of ICTs on family solidarity in Finland can be considered simultaneously beneficial and destructive. As anticipated above, we propose that these diverse effects can be understood through the concept of *refamilisation*. With regard to ICT use, refamilisation refers to the fact that many ICT tools and applications today are used to revive and sustain family solidarity, especially in distributed families. This development is not separate from networked individualism (also see Kennedy & Wellman, 2007), but rather takes place alongside with it.

In this study we have argued that recent technological developments have favoured refamilisation, since new ICTs and especially mobile social networking applications are more pro-social: they provide better support for one-to-many communication (Castells, 2009; Ling & Lai, 2016) than do older personal communication technologies. New mobile broadband technologies offer a great variety of devices and applications that can be used to keep the whole family, no matter how large or geographically dispersed, informed without any extra effort in comparison to one-to-one communication (Neustaedter et al., 2013).

Based on the analysis presented above, refamilisation manifests itself in the daily uses of ICTs not only as increased intra-family communication but in many other ways as well. First, refamilisation appears as the *democratization* of the family. We discovered that ICT has an important equalizing function with regard to mastering the social media: it provides 'a voice' to the younger generations within a family unit and gives them thus more power over everyday family matters. This kind of unambiguous democratization of the Finnish family structure was commonly described as a positive development by the interviewees regardless of the generation under analysis.

The rise of *proxies* – or warm experts (Bakardjieva, 2005; Dolničar et al., 2013) – is another distinctive feature of refamilisation directly related to the democratization of the family. Being a proxy is generally regarded as a positive development that enhances the power of young people within the family unit. However, this new role is sometimes considered also as a liability as it entails responsibility and extra work that the proxy does not always appreciate. In many daily technological matters, it is the proxy person who serves as a new head of the networked family.

Thirdly, it is important to notice that refamilisation through ICTs is not only a positive trend. Our analysis showed that the intensification of family communication via ICTs has also meant the *compartmentalization of communication*, in which primarily family members with the necessary devices, applications and good ICT skills are included. Even if communication has been enhanced between some family members, it has left out the majority of grandparents, parents and some other relatives who do not have similar skills or interest in emerging ICTs. From parents' point of view, compartmentalized communication can also become a problem if it diminishes their ability to pass on important life skills or to control their children in situations in which the children need guidance in social media.

Finally, refamilisation alludes to the changes in the *conception of time* within families. Whereas in traditional core families ICTs are often associated with the lack of time spent together face-to-face at home, it is in distributed extended families that the positive benefits of ICTs can be seen. The advantage of apparently unimportant messages and

other phatic communication among families is the fact they are not time-consuming practices and that they can be used to keep in touch and to create a sense family solidarity regardless of place or geographical distance (see also Cao, 2013).

Note

1. Phatic communication is an established expression in the field of communication studies. However, originally Malinowski (1924/1994) used the term phatic *communion* to describe that the importance of seemingly meaningless and purposeless talk for social bonding. Unlike *communication,* phatic communion does not primarily aim to the exchange of information.

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