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## ‘Connected presence’ in distributed family life

TOKE HAUNSTRUP CHRISTENSEN  
*Aalborg University, Denmark*

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### Abstract

Concurrent with the explosive pervasion of information and communication technologies in recent years, mediated communication has gained a strong position in the daily interaction between family members. Based on the results of qualitative interviews with families in Denmark, this article shows how the mobile phone is used by parents and children to mediate a feeling of closeness while they are physically separated. This practice of ‘connected presence’ is based on frequent calls and text messages between parents and children as well as between parents themselves. The article also analyses families’ use of the mobile phone in the context of modern family life, emphasizing the importance of the temporal and spatial dispersion of family members in explaining the form and content of intra-familial mediated communication. Finally, the dual role of media technologies (including the mobile phone) in both integrating and dispersing families is discussed.

### Key words

everyday life • mediated communication • mobile phones • modern family life • presence

## INTRODUCTION

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) has increased greatly since the early 1990s, and communication by email, the internet, mobile phone and Short Message Service (SMS; ‘texting’) has become an integral part of society and everyday life. By 2007, 95 percent of Danish

families owned one or more mobile phones and the number of text messages sent by people in Denmark was 10.1 billion in 2006 – an average of approximately 1850 messages per inhabitant (Statistics Denmark, 2007). Modern ICT is being integrated into an increasing number of social practices, contributing to changes in both their symbolic and practical content. Several studies have focused on these changes and have shown how, for example, relationships are being maintained increasingly through multiple media such as the mobile phone, email and the internet in combination with face-to-face interaction (e.g. Baym et al., 2004); the studies also show how adoption of the mobile phone has changed the way in which people organize everyday activities (e.g. Ling and Yttri, 2002).

On the basis of qualitative interviews with families in Denmark, this article explores the connections between modern family life and mediated communication between family members. Special attention is devoted to voice calls and SMS, as the interviews showed that family members preferred to use the landline telephone, and particularly the mobile phone. The analytical focus is on the parents, their mediated communication with each other and with their children, while the communication between children – and between more distant relatives such as grandparents and grandchildren or cousins – is not considered. The analyses and discussions are directed by two questions: what is the form and content of mediated communication between family members? How is mediated communication related to changes in modern family life?

To address these questions, knowledge of the symbolic and practical dimensions of the everyday life of families is essential. Without this knowledge, analyses of families' use of mobile phones are decontextualized, and it becomes difficult to establish an adequate understanding of the web of interrelated meanings and practices into which mobile telephony is integrated. As with other technologies, the integration of the mobile phone into the everyday life of individuals and families involves a double-sided process of domestication (Silverstone et al., 1992) in which technology is adapted to everyday life at the same time as everyday life is adapted to technology (Aune, 1996). Following this line of thinking, this article explores how mobile phone use for communication between family members is part of families' (especially parents') attempts to manage the increasing temporal and spatial dispersion of family members and their (individual) activities. A more detailed description of the 'distributed family' is provided later in this article in order to set the context for the analysis of mobile phone use for intra-familial communication.

Since the 1990s, much literature has appeared on the use of mobile phones. It covers a wide range of interrelated subject fields such as the diffusion of ownership and mobile phone use, studies of the symbolic aspects of mobile

phones and their 'social history', the micro-social aspects of usage (especially mobile phone use in 'public space', e.g. Humphreys, 2005), and the changing experience and organization of activities and interpersonal relations in everyday life related to mobile phone use (see Brown et al., 2002 and Katz and Aakhus, 2002 for a comprehensive presentation of studies on mobile phone usage).

Quantitative studies such as those of Baym et al. (2004) and Wei and Lo (2006) show how the mobile phone is used to maintain intimate relationships and to stay in contact with one's family. According to Wei and Lo, the mobile phone enhances the ties between family members, with women in particular relying on 'extensive use of cell phones to show affection to their families while on the move' (2006: 68). The results from Baym et al.'s and Wei and Lo's studies are supported by others (including the present study), indicating that the mobile phone generally plays an important role in relation to family members' management of their interpersonal relations.

While quantitative analyses bring important insights into the distribution and frequency of practices related to mobile phone use, qualitative analyses based on detailed interviews or field studies help to illuminate the social dynamics in which these practices are embedded. Based on 17 semi-structured interviews with nine families in Denmark, the aim of this study is to provide a detailed description of the practices related to intra-familial communication and how these are integrated into modern family and everyday life. Drawing on these empirical findings and those of other researchers, this article shows that frequent mobile phone use creates an experience of 'closeness' or 'presence' between family members who are together physically for only a few hours on a typical day. Thus, mediated intra-familial communication is part of a continuous affirmation and reaffirmation of close relations within the distributed family. Licoppe's (2004) concept of 'connected presence', which emphasizes these phenomenological implications of mobile phone usage, is introduced and contextualized within the setting of modern family life. The role of gender differences is downplayed deliberately, as these have been explored by several other studies (e.g. Chesley, 2005; Frissen, 1995, 2000; Navarro and Rakow, 1993; Rakow, 1988; Vestby, 1996). Instead, this article focuses on the practices of intra-familial mediated communication shared by males and females (fathers and mothers, sons and daughters).

Before analysing the conditions of modern family life and the practices of mediated intra-familial communication and how these are interrelated, a brief literature review of studies on mobile phone use for intra-familial communication and some methodological reflections are provided in the following sections.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While much literature has appeared on mobile phone use, there is far less literature that focuses specifically on families' use of mobile phones for the communication and organization of their everyday life. Some studies focus on the spatial and temporal organization of family members and their activities, and how this organization is coordinated and re-coordinated continuously through the use of mobile communication technologies (e.g. Frissen, 2000; Ling, 2004; Ling and Yttri, 2002). Ling and Yttri call this practice 'micro-coordination', which is associated closely with mobile phone use for 'nuanced instrumental coordination' (2002: 139).

While these studies emphasize the instrumental dimension of families' mobile phone use, others broaden the perspective to include the expressive dimension, i.e. the emotional content of calls and text messages. Studies on remote parenting appear to be particularly important for an understanding of parents' use of communication technologies for 'taking care' of their children while away from home. This concept was developed originally by studies on the use of landline telephones, and is sometimes called 'remote mothering' to indicate that the practice of remote parenting is highly gendered (Navarro and Rakow, 1993; Vestby, 1996).

According to a Norwegian study on families' landline telephone use conducted in the early 1990s by Vestby (1996), the practice of remote parenting includes elements of both control and care. Parental control is exercised through calls between parents and children about whether the children can obtain parental approval for something, while parental care is practised through what Vestby terms 'positive control'. An example of this is a mother phoning her children to find out if they are 'safely home from school and if everything is all right' (1996: 76). As the term 'positive control' indicates, the elements of care and control are closely interrelated. Also, Vestby notes that the expressive dimension is often embedded in calls that, on the face of it, appear to be entirely instrumental. Therefore, it is important to recognize the ambiguous content of mediated communication and not to distinguish too strongly between instrumental and expressive calls.

Families' mobile phone use also relates to issues or concerns other than micro-coordination and remote parenting. Most importantly, mobile phone use provides a general sense of security, which is stated as one of the strongest motives for purchasing a mobile phone (Ling, 2004; Røpke, 2003). As suggested by Mante-Meijer and Haddon (2001), the issue of security is probably a part of widespread mobile phone use for handling the contingencies of everyday life: the occurrence of unplanned and uncontrollable incidents such as accidents or emergencies, delays or externally enforced changes in planned activities.

These studies on micro-coordination, remote parenting and security contribute important insights into the different dimensions of intra-familial communication mediated by the mobile phone and landline telephone. However, the following sections emphasize the importance of studying not only the single dimensions, but also the broader phenomenological and micro-social implications of mediated intra-familial communication. It is argued that each call or text message – whether instrumental or expressive (or both) in content – contributes to the creation of a general sense of closeness between family members while they are physically separated.

## METHOD

The study is based on qualitative and semi-structured research interviews conducted during 2004–6 as part of a research project on families' use of modern ICT in everyday life. Compared to the questionnaires used in survey studies, qualitative research interviews are more open to pursue new themes and ideas that appear during the interview. In the words of Kvale, the semi-structured interview:

has a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions. Yet at the same time there is an openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects. (1996: 124)

Due to this openness, qualitative interviews are especially suitable when the intention is to explore everyday practices that are not well understood, and to uncover new connections that the researcher has not considered beforehand.

Nine families with children living at home participated in the study. They were selected to ensure a large variation with regard to the family situation: four of the families were nuclear families, two were single-parent families and in three families, the parents were in their second relationship with joint custody of the children from their first relationship. Except for one mother, all the parents were employed at the time of the interviews.

Seventeen interviews were conducted, as each family (except for one) was interviewed twice. In the first interview, only one of the parents (the main participant) was interviewed, while in the second interview both parents (if a couple) were interviewed. Whenever possible, adolescents also participated in the second interview, contributing their experience of their own and their parents' use of ICT. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and the participants were questioned about their use of ICT in general. To illuminate the complex relations between ICT use and the participants' everyday life, the interviews also included more general topics such as how the family organizes everyday life, the relation between work and family life and the parents' experience of time at work and at home.

Although the choice of interview themes was prepared deliberately in order to include as many ICT technologies as relevant, depending on what kind of ICT technologies each family and family member used on daily basis, the use of the telephone (landline phone and particularly the mobile phone) for communication between family members kept recurring as a main issue across all families. Therefore, long stretches of the interviews dealt with the family members' intra-familial communication through telephone calls and text messaging.

The empirical analyses presented in this article are based on repeated readings of the transcribed interviews and condensations of the interview transcripts into narratives ('family stories') that describe the everyday life of the families and their use of ICT.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The distributed family

The previously mentioned dispersion of family members and their activities is partly a result of the increasing specialization and spatial distribution of activities and services in modern society:

[A] characteristic of contemporary society is that we often have a variety of tasks and appointments spread around a city. One child may be at day care, a second several miles away in an elementary school. Shopping is off in one direction, your job is in a second and your dentist appointment is in yet a third. (Ling, 2004: 61)

This distribution of activities in time and space not only results in an increased need for coordination of family members and their individual and shared activities (as showed by mobile phone use for micro-coordination), it also exerts pressure on families' attempts to build family unity into their everyday life. Furthermore, spatial dispersion of activities and services is related closely to the process of individualization, which seems to be one of the strongest explanations for the emergence of the distributed family as the modern form of family life. This process can be seen in that 'each individual is integrated in more and more as well as stronger and stronger non-familial activities and organizations or institutions as a representative for himself or herself only' (Holter et al., 1975: 76; author's translation). Each family member participates in a number of separated domains, of which home and family is just one: other domains include work, school, daycare, peer groups, volunteer work, leisure interests and other activities outside the home. At the individual level, the division of everyday life into separate domains results in fragmentation and experiences of domain-conflicts, such as imbalances between work and family life (Røpke, 2001).

The dispersion of family members and their activities also takes place at home. This is probably most visible in relation to the trend of privatization in children's access to and use of media technologies: in an increasing number of dwellings, children's bedrooms are equipped with a wide range of media technologies, and they spend many hours alone occupied with different activities such as playing computer games, surfing the internet, watching television or communicating with their friends through phone calls, text messaging and instant messaging. Livingstone (2002), who has described this trend of privatization in detail, concludes that:

The long-term trend clearly involves moving new screen-based media – the television in the 1960s, the VCR [videocassette recorder] in the 1980s, the computer in the late 1990s – away from the main family space of the living room where they generally start their domestic career, towards more individualised spaces, particularly the bedroom/play room. (2002: 137)

Thus, growing stocks of individual media technologies, in combination with the diversification and specialization of consumption (e.g. more television channels targeting specific segments such as young children, adolescents and adults), support the individualization of activities at home (Røpke, 1999). Consequently, the individualization of activities creates a spatial and temporal distribution of domestic life similar to the dispersion outside the home. In the words of Gergen: 'Even within the family, geographic propinquity now means little. In large measure, each family member lives a psychologically separated life' (2003: 105).

Several of the interviewed parents were well aware of the possible disadvantages of the privatization of their children's use of media technologies. For example, one father feared that allowing his teenage daughters to have their own computers would separate the family members. Another example was a mother of a 14-year-old girl from a previous relationship explicitly complaining about her daughter, who spent most of the time on visits to her mother in front of her laptop, communicating with friends through instant messaging. The mother felt that it was almost as though her daughter 'wasn't there' with the rest of the family.

### Creating closeness through mediated communication

In order to show how mediated communication between family members is related closely to how they manage the conditions of modern family life in Denmark, the following empirical analyses are based on a detailed presentation of two of the interviewed families. In this way, it is possible to give a more thorough description of the communicative practices that involve mobile phone and landline telephone use, and to relate them to the



way in which these families organize their everyday life and manage their interpersonal relations.

With regard to family situation and occupation, the selected families differ from the other interviewed families in two respects: first, they are both nuclear families and second, all the parents are professionals with demanding careers. However, these two families' communicative practices are very similar to those described by the other families, therefore the following description is illustrative of how families in Denmark use voice calls and text messaging in their daily communication.

Nuclear families are still the most widespread family arrangement in Denmark. By 2008, 73 percent of Danish children (aged 0–17 years) lived in nuclear families, while 18 percent lived with a single parent (typically their mother), and eight percent with one parent and their new partner (Statistics Denmark, 2008). Also, dual-career families are fairly common in Denmark; by 2004, both parents were employed in 78 percent of all families with parents aged 25–49 years and with at least one child younger than 13 years (Statistics Denmark, 2005). Thus, the selected families' situation – nuclear families with working parents – is similar to the majority of families in Denmark.

In this study, the selected families are named the Hansens and the Paulsons (pseudonyms in order to protect anonymity). Patrick Hansen (the main participant) is married to Helen. Both are in their early forties and they have two sons aged 10 and 13. Tina Paulson (main participant) is married to Jim. Both are around 50 years old, and they have two daughters aged 14 and 17 who participated in the second interview with the family. The table below summarizes some of the main characteristics of the two families, and

• Table 1 Main characteristics of the interviewed families

THE HANSEN FAMILY	THE PAULSON FAMILY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live in the countryside, about 100km from their work in Copenhagen, and commute by two cars</li> <li>• Full-time management positions in private companies, including much travelling</li> <li>• Much communication by mobile phone between the parents themselves and between the parents and their children during the day and while the parents drive home from work</li> <li>• Patrick and Helen share most of the domestic work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live 30–40km from their work in Copenhagen. Tina commutes by train and Jim by car</li> <li>• Tina works part-time (30 hours per week) as a journalist; Jim has a full-time management position in a private trade organization, which includes some business travelling</li> <li>• Tina communicates much by phone and mobile phone with her daughters during the day</li> <li>• Tina has main responsibility for domestic work</li> </ul>

shows some of the main differences and similarities in their conditions of everyday life.

Patrick Hansen works from home one or two days a week, supported by ICT such as the landline telephone, mobile phone, computer and broadband internet connection. From home, Patrick participates in ICT-mediated meetings with colleagues of the multinational company for which he works. While Patrick and his wife Helen often work from home in the evenings and the weekends, the parents of the Paulson family rarely work from home. The following goes into further detail about the families' use of the telephone (mobile and landline) for intra-familial communication. (All interview excerpts have been translated from Danish to English by the author.)

### **Mediated communication between family members**

Each member of the two families has their own mobile phone, which is used daily. None of the families use email for intra-familial communication on a regular basis. Only occasionally does one parent send short notes by email about work-related issues that might be of interest to the other. The rare use of emails for intra-familial communication is in accordance with most of the other interviewed families; in only one family do the parents send short email greetings such as 'how are you?' to each other on a daily basis and while at work. The interviews point to several reasons why internet-based media such as email and instant messaging are seldom used for intra-familial communication: first, communication by email and instant messaging implies easy access to computers and the internet, which is only the case for parents with much screen-based work. Second, some of the interviewed parents (e.g. Patrick and Helen Hansen) associate email with work-related and formal communication, and therefore find the mobile phone more suitable for family-related contact. Finally, the choice of the mobile phone for intra-familial communication should be interpreted in light of the parents' and children's different media preferences; whereas email is used predominantly by the parents (and almost never by the children interviewed), the opposite is true with regard to instant messaging.

Both the Hansen and Paulson families use their mobile phones for frequent communication between parents and children. The two Paulson daughters call their mother several times a day while she is at work. More rarely, they send her text messages (both Tina and Jim find text messaging inconvenient and often forget to look for new messages). The two Hansen sons call their parents several times during the workday or send text messages. In both families, it is the youngest of the children who makes most of the calls, which is in line with the observations made by Ling and Yttri (2002) that the frequency of calls between parents and children is highest when the children are young and decreases as they grow older and become more independent.

Indeed, some of the adolescents participating in the interviews explained that to some degree they found calls and text messages from their parents annoying, which indicates that parental calls can be interpreted by adolescents as interfering and challenging their desire for independence.

Patrick Hansen explains how the children often call him and his wife about 'just ordinary everyday things'. Most of his examples are about situations where the children ask for permission to do something:

If he [Albert] can have a piece of chocolate, if they [Albert and his brother] can make themselves a cup of cocoa. It can also be about things such as whether they can invite their school friends home. It's a lot of these just ordinary everyday practical things. The most exotic thing I have experienced was that he [Albert] had seen something in a sales brochure – [and] he couldn't explain [to me] what it was. So I asked him to take a picture of it [with his mobile phone] and send it to me. He did so and then I could see what he was talking about.

Patrick and Helen often call their children to ensure that everything is fine. They call them in the afternoon 'just to hear whether they have had a safe journey home' and to 'check that everything is all right', as Patrick explains. These examples are in accordance with the earlier-mentioned studies, which demonstrate security to be one of the strongest motives for mobile phone use. On a more general level, frequent calls help to establish relationships of 'mutual accountability' and trust through 'gathering information about the physical, social and psychological conditions' of the interlocutor (Green, 2002: 32).

That calls between parents and children include elements other than security and mutual accountability can be seen in Patrick and Helen Hansen often calling their children about 'practical things': while driving home from work in the afternoon, they call their children to hear 'if there is anything that is needed' and that they should buy. Besides the practical dimension of coordinating the afternoon shopping, these calls illustrate how parents use the mobile phone to express their concern for their children's needs and desires at a distance. Similar examples of both instrumental and expressive calls are found in Tina Paulson's description of her daughters' daily calls while she is at work:

They call me about, now they're on their way home [from school] or, 'Can I go home to so and so's house?' All sorts of practical things – 'Will you buy this and that' – all such small things, right ... Especially when they were younger, they also called me if they were miserable or if they had problems or things like that. If I'm in here [at the office] in the evening, then I call them and say goodnight, of course [laughs]. Things like that, right ... That is something I appreciate very much.

They call me if something has happened, 'Now, listen to this, I got 10 [grade in school, comparable to the B grade in the USA] in this or that exercise' – they can't wait until I get home. Or, if something has gone haywire – they have

fallen out with someone, or the mobile phone has been stolen or – so many things happen.

That calls between parents and children cover a wide range of issues is shown by the youngest daughter Linda Paulson's account of the calls that she receives from her parents during the afternoon on a typical weekday:

Mum is the first who calls, 'Hi, I'm still at work – I'll be at home about six o'clock', and then a little later Dad calls, 'Hi, have you had a nice day [in school]? I'll probably be at home about seven o'clock'. And then a little later Mum calls again, 'Hi, I'm coming home in a half hour' and then Dad calls, 'I'll be home in 20 minutes'.

Linda and Tina Paulson's stories illustrate the numerous elements comprised by landline telephone and mobile phone communication between parents and children: the parents' expressive calls showing attentiveness to their children (e.g. 'Have you had a nice day' and 'saying goodnight'), securing mutual accountability through information about the physical and psychological conditions of the interlocutors (e.g. 'I'm still at work' and 'Have you had a nice day'), sharing exciting or disturbing experiences (e.g. 'I got 10' or 'if something has gone haywire'), parental control (e.g. children asking for their parents' permission to visit friends) and micro-coordination ('I'll be home in 20 minutes').

The parents in the two families also call each other regularly. Patrick and Helen Hansen often have long conversations on the mobile phone in the afternoon while driving home from their workplace in Copenhagen. Patrick explains that they talk about 'everything, from practical things to work'. They use each other as 'sparring partners', as they both hold management positions and therefore experience similar types of situations and management problems. As a result, they often discuss how to deal with specific conflicts and problems at work while driving home. Their conversation usually continues after arriving home at more or less the same time.

Tina Paulson and her husband also call each other during the daytime. Their calls can be about reorganizing schedules (if something unexpected has happened to one of them) or to give 'important news', as exemplified by the following excerpt from the interview with Tina. Jim had been at a medical examination and Tina had to work overtime:

My husband called. He had been at a medical examination and he told about how it went. And a little later he called [again] and told me that he would go on a golfing trip in April. No, it was me who called him ... and that [her phone call to her husband] was in relation to this thing that I would be late, and who should buy food [go shopping] and things like that .... He said that he was [still] at work. And then I said, 'Well, couldn't we just take something or other [to eat] at home' and he said that he would get a Chinese takeaway.

• Table 2 Situations and issues related to calls and text messages between family members

CALLS BETWEEN PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN	CALLS BETWEEN PARENTS THEMSELVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking for permission: the younger children in particular often call their parents to ask for their permission for something (e.g. to invite friends home)</li> <li>• Solving unexpected problems: children call their parents if something unexpected happens (e.g. if they miss the school bus). Also parents call their children if something unexpected changes their plans</li> <li>• ‘How is it going’: a number of calls are made for apparently no reason other than ‘just to hear how it’s going’</li> <li>• ‘Exciting news’: children sometimes call their parents if something exciting has happened to them</li> <li>• Daily planning: calls related to the planning and coordination of the everyday life of the family and its members (e.g. children who want to be picked up by a parent)</li> <li>• ‘Personal problems’: children calling their parents if they are miserable, angry, frustrated or emotionally shaken</li> <li>• Greetings: parents away from home in the evening or at night call their children to say ‘goodnight’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily planning: calls related to planning and coordination on a day-to-day basis (e.g. coordinate dinner and shopping)</li> <li>• Work-related calls: calls related to the parents’ professional occupations and interests – primarily done by professionals with similar occupations or job situations</li> <li>• ‘Exciting news’: some parents call each other if something exciting or extraordinary has happened</li> <li>• Greetings: calling each other to say ‘goodnight’ or ‘good morning’ (if one of the parents is away from home). Three of the seven interviewed couples also send daily text messages explicitly expressing their mutual love and devotedness (e.g. ‘I love you’)</li> </ul>

In summary, mediated communication between parents and between themselves and their children covers a wide range of issues. To show this great variety, Table 2 summarizes the situations and issues related to calls by mobile phone and landline phone as well as text messages, as represented in the interviews with the families in Denmark. Some of these calls or text messages are clearly instrumental (e.g. ‘daily planning’) or expressive (e.g. ‘greetings’) in content, while others seem to be both (e.g. children ‘asking for permission’ and ‘solving unexpected problems’). The table is not an attempt to create a typology of calls between family members, as it does not show the full complexity of communicative practice between family members. In addition, each call often involves several of the listed elements within the same conversation.

### Transcending physical separation through ‘connected presence’

In their book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann note that the face-to-face situation forms the basis for social interaction and

social relations; it is the 'prototypical case of social interaction' (1966: 28) from which all other forms of communication can be derived. With the proliferation of personal and portable communication technologies, the question arises as to what degree this challenges the position of the face-to-face situation as the prototype of social interaction. According to Fortunati (2005), ICT use undermines the role of face-to-face (or body-to-body) communication as the primary mode of social interaction and blurs the boundaries between mediated and non-mediated communication. Fortunati also points out various dynamics in modern society that intensify this process, including the growing fragmentation of sociality in the shape of an extension of the individual's social network, and the increasingly separate paths of individuals.

As shown by the previous section on family members' mobile phone use, the adoption and use of new ICT technologies changes intra-familial communication by integrating mediated communication as an inseparable part. However, the interviews also indicate that physical co-presence remains the bedrock on which close relationships are built. In the Danish context, dinner situations in particular play an important role in the everyday life of families. All the interviewed families keep their daily evening meal as a significant institution and individual activities are coordinated so that the family members can manage to gather around the table. Similarly, for some of the participants (for example, Tina Paulson), morning situations play an important role and the parents (most typically the mother) rarely leave home before their children. Also, holidays are regarded as valuable by most of the families; for example, the Hansen parents regard holidays as an opportunity to escape their hectic and tightly planned everyday lives and experience an intense feeling of togetherness.

Thus, evening meals, morning situations, holidays and other more or less regular situations of physical co-presence during weekdays and weekends still form the basis for vivid and close family relationships. This said, the interviews also show that mobile phones play a decisive role in families' daily communication, and that mediated and non-mediated modes of communication are highly intertwined. Therefore, it is necessary to include mediated interaction in our understanding of family members' management of their interpersonal relations.

Working from an interactionist and constructivist perspective, Licoppe (2004) describes relationships as basically grounded in constantly recurring interactions which, besides physical co-presence, also include mediated interaction. With regard to the latter, Licoppe notes that '[each] of these mediated interactions reactivates, reaffirms and reconfigures the relationship' (2004: 138). In total, the recurring interactions – co-present or mediated – assume the metaphoric form of a 'continuous conversation', and in a 'partly

autonomous private sphere, strong bonds are reaffirmed and experienced through series of interactions' (2004: 145).

Thus, mediated communication plays an increasingly important role in contributing to the continuous production and reproduction of the close and intimate relations of the family. Modern families adopt new technologies such as the mobile phone and use them intensively for intra-familial communication while they are physically separated during most of the day. Mobile phones are used for practising micro-coordination, remote parenting and parental control, expressive conversations, sharing experiences with other family members or merely seeking personal contact with those absent (e.g. the children of the Hansen family who call their parents to hear what they are doing). However, more importantly: whether instrumental or expressive in content, mobile phone use creates an experience of presence or closeness between family members, which transcends their physical separation.

Although there are important exceptions, frequent and short calls with a seemingly instrumental content dominate the mediated communication of the families interviewed. Exceptions include expressive conversations such as Tina Paulson's daughters, who occasionally make longer calls to their mother if they feel miserable or have had a quarrel with their sister or best friend. The flow of short calls corresponds to what Licoppe denotes as 'connected presence' or the 'connected mode of interaction':

It is through the frequency and continuity of this flow – in which the fact of calling counts at least as much if not more than which is said, and in which a presence is guaranteed by expressing a state, feeling, or emotion rather than by constructing a shared experience through relating past events and giving one's news – that the strength of the interlocutors' mutual engagement in the relationship is guaranteed. (2004: 152)

Thus, even the shortest and most instrumental call contributes to the continuous flow of interaction that keeps intimate relations between family members alive, and the concept of connected presence helps to draw attention to the experience of interpersonal closeness engendered by families' landline telephone and mobile phone use. Connected presence is related as much to the form (characterized by frequent and mostly short calls and text messages) as to the content of the conversations conveyed by these technologies. Taking into account the empirical findings from the interviews, connected presence seems to consist of two core elements, which are closely connected and to some extent indistinguishable:

- presence at a distance – carrying the mobile phone means at least in principle having closest family continually within reach. In using the mobile phone, family members keep each other up-to-date with

changes in their individual plans and to some extent also share their individual experiences; and

- continuous reactivation and reaffirmation of strong bonds – whether instrumental or expressive in content, each call or text message reaffirms the close relations between family members and contributes to the continuous conversation that is the foundation of close and meaningful relationships.

Although mediated communication has for many years played an important role in the maintenance of family interpersonal relations (as shown by earlier studies on landline telephone use for remote parenting), the introduction of the mobile phone has brought a significant rise in the frequency of mediated interactions between family members; today, the communicative practice of connected presence plays an important role for the continuous reproduction of the family's intimate relations.

### Connected presence and the distributed family

To contextualize the communicative practice of connected presence, it is important to note that creating a feeling of closeness through mobile phone use is just one of several strategies employed by parents to manage the conditions of modern family life, produce and reproduce strong bonds and maintain the family as a unit. Busy parents in particular, such as the Hansens and Paulsons, seem to be attentive to the latent tension between, on the one hand, devoting considerable amounts of time and energy to a professional career and, on the other, being an attentive and caring mum or dad as well as wife or husband. The domain of work with its long hours and, as in the case of Patrick and Helen Hansen, many business trips, contribute to the fragmentation of family life. For Helen Hansen, these work-related activities challenge her idea of what it means to be a family:

It's very much like 'when Mum gets home, Dad is leaving' [refers to a popular Danish tune from the 1970s] and vice versa ... Some times are even worse than others ... We can have up to three weeks where we [Patrick and Helen] virtually don't see each other, except on weekends.

The diversity of strategies employed by parents to create a feeling of presence or closeness between family members who are not physically gathered or occupied in a shared activity can be illustrated by the following example from the Hansen family. When working in the evenings, Patrick and Helen prefer to sit with their laptops at the kitchen table while their children often sit on the sofa in the living room watching television. A hallway with opposite doors separates the kitchen and the living room. Shortly before the interviews, Patrick and Helen had deliberately repositioned the furniture



in the kitchen and the living room to create a visual link between the two rooms. Now, they can work at the kitchen table and have visual contact with their children watching television in the living room.

By establishing a visual link, Patrick and Helen tried to develop an experience of presence even when several metres and different activities separate them and their children. Similar examples of presence mediated by material objects, visual links between rooms or the use of communication technologies can be found in all the interviews. However, these strategies are most prevalent among families with career-oriented parents, who typically have irregular working hours and spend more time on work than other parents.

The scattered distribution of family members and their individual activities in time and space creates tension between the everyday life conditions of the distributed family, the ideology of the family as a unit, and parental injunctions that prompt parents to engage continuously and extensively in their children's upbringing and everyday life. Establishing a sense of togetherness and unity through the communicative practice of connected presence represents one way of managing this tension. Vestby (1996) reached similar conclusions in her study of Norwegian families' landline telephone use:

Members of modern families spend considerable time and resources outside the home, making lots of appointments and arrangements. Thus, the 'appointment family' ... has to construct social gatherings and to build family unity into their everyday lives. As a consequence, interaction between the family members is characterized by independent actions and unifying processes, in which the telephone plays an important role. The telephone has a function in the unifying processes because its incorporation into family life facilitates the capacity of the family to sustain itself as a social entity. (1996: 78)

Dual-career families in particular experience this tension, and Vestby's study shows how the landline telephone was employed by these families as a means to manage this conflict through the practice of remote parenting. The adoption of mobile phone use has enhanced this practice dramatically and developed it into a generalized practice of keeping the close relations between family members active throughout the day. Today, the communicative practice of connected presence is grounded in numerous calls and is not restricted to the cross-boundary communication between parents at work and children at home; voice calls and text messages criss-cross the distinct domains of children and parents as well as of the parents themselves.

## CONCLUSION

This article suggests that we are witnessing the emergence of new ways of managing interpersonal relations within the family that would have been inconceivable 10 to 15 years ago. First and foremost, these new ways are

enabled by the mobile phone; second, they are prompted by the general trend of spatial and temporal dispersion of family life and by parents' perpetual attempts to juggle the conflicting ideals imbued in our modern understanding of parenthood, family life and individuality. Mobile phone use has become an integral part of the everyday life of modern families and a central element in parents' attempts to create a 'good family life'.

The main aim of this article has been to explore how a new practice of mediated communication, which constitutes a feeling of presence-at-a-distance between family members, seems to be emerging. As mentioned previously, based on frequent calls and text messaging, this practice of connected presence contributes to the continuous reactivation and reaffirmation of the strong bonds between family members and comprises elements of parental care and control, security and mutual accountability and micro-coordination. Although not an entirely new practice, the massive diffusion of portable and personal communication technologies seems to enhance dramatically the significance of mediated communication between family members, resulting in an intertwining of mediated and non-mediated interaction. However, the question arises as to whether mobile phone use to create connected presence enables in the end further intensification of the very same conditions of modern family life to which it is a response. Could it be that in the long run, the omnipresent possibility of creating a feeling of presence-at-a-distance actually assists a continued dispersion of family life? It would be interesting for future studies to explore the possible existence of this kind of mutual relationship between the use of personal and portable communication technologies and the changing conditions and forms of modern family life.

Interestingly, the interviews showed how this kind of dialectical relationship is embedded in the family members' use of media technologies. At the same time that ICT use helps parents and children to create an experience of closeness through the practice of connected presence, the long-term trend of individualized access to and use of these technologies distributes family life and separates family members, even at home. This tension between ICT 'bringing together the family' versus 'distributing family members' was expressed by the participants' ambivalent attitude towards children's use of media technologies. It would be interesting if future studies could explore this tension in greater detail.

Finally, it is important to note that the results and analyses presented in this article are based on qualitative interviews with a limited number of families in Denmark. Although the patterns of family life and ICT usage in Denmark probably resemble other occidental countries, national differences in, for example, gender roles, ideological understanding of a 'good family life', the labour market and employment conditions (e.g. the extent of

women's or mothers' participation in the workforce) and ICT infrastructure might influence families' communicative practices. Therefore, future studies aimed at transferring the ideas and findings presented in this article to other countries should observe carefully the role of cultural and national differences.

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TOKE HAUNSTRUP CHRISTENSEN is a researcher at the Danish Building Research Institute, Aalborg University. His research interests focus primarily on media use and the interplay between new technology, social change and the environment.

Address: Danish Building Research Institute, Aalborg University, Dr. Neergaards Vej 15, Hørsholm 2970, Denmark. [email: [thc@sbi.dk](mailto:thc@sbi.dk)]

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