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Do smart phones bring us closer? A family life and vacation perspective

Heather Kennedy-Eden
University of Wollongong, hkeden@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

Relationships developed in families are crucial because these bonds play an integral part in learning how to function and interact in society. In the past, these bonds were strengthened by spending leisure time together as a family but now smart phone technology provides opportunities for individual entertainment, connecting on social media, and spending time physically together while being emotionally separated. This research looks at this issue from a systems theory perspective, conceptualizing families as open, self-regulating social systems with the smart phone being a technical system within the family system. The smart phone acts as a conduit between immediate family members and to friends, family, and social networks and information beyond. The main research question relates to analysing interactions within such a socio-technical family system. A secondary question entails how the interactions with smart phones play out in two different environments, the everyday family life and the family vacation.

Keywords

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Do Smart Phones Bring Us Closer? A family life and vacation perspective

Heather Kennedy-Eden
University of Wollongong, Australia
HLKE897@uow.edu.au

Abstract

Relationships developed in families are crucial because these bonds play an integral part in learning how to function and interact in society. In the past, these bonds were strengthened by spending leisure time together as a family but now smart phone technology provides opportunities for individual entertainment, connecting on social media, and spending time physically together while being emotionally separated. This research looks at this issue from a systems theory perspective, conceptualizing families as open, self-regulating social systems with the smart phone being a technical system within the family system. The smart phone acts as a conduit between immediate family members and to friends, family, and social networks and information beyond. The main research question relates to analysing interactions within such a socio-technical family system. A secondary question entails how the interactions with smart phones play out in two different environments, the everyday family life and the family vacation.

Problem Definition

Technology is changing the way families communicate and spend time together. Many families now have smart phones which offer a hand held portal to entertainment, social networks and other distractions. Some say that these technologies are pulling families apart (Turkle, 2011) but others contend that this new medium has become an integral part of the mainstream family and aids in staying connected and with scheduling (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Fraser, 2012).

Although technology has changed the way families are communicating, it has not lessened the importance of family ties. Attachment and socialization skills are nurtured through continuous family interaction (Belcher, Peckuonis, & Deforge, 2011). However, families in contemporary Western societies are spending more time apart on a day-to-day basis because of dual careers and shift work (Valentine, 2006), so time spent together is important, especially while on vacation. The family vacation is a long standing tradition. It is an opportunity to spend time together, bond as a family, travel to new destinations, and create memories (Hilbrecht, Shaw, Delamere, & Havitz, 2008). The goal of this research is to gain an understanding of how families are mediating the use of

smart phone technology so that it does not interfere with family bonding in everyday life and especially on vacation.

Literature Review

Family bonding is defined as the amount of attachment, connection, or emotional closeness that family members feel towards each other (Bahr, Maughan, Marcos, & Li, 1998). Family vacations are important for family bonding because they provide a break in the normal day-to-day routine of family life and offer the opportunity to spend time together. Family vacations provide balance in families, they strengthen relationships and offer opportunities to problem solve as a family (Agate, Zabriskie, Agate, & TaylorPoff, 2009). Research on family bonding primarily deals with families in regular leisure settings; therefore further insight is needed for family vacations.

Family groups are staying connected with mobile technology because they offer flexibility and reassurance. Smart phones are growing in popularity because they combine social media, internet, email, texting, and mobile applications (apps) into one device and have quickly integrated into the fabric of everyday family life (Green, 2002). This everyday use has spilled over into the vacation setting as smart phones offer access to Web 2.0 applications, like travel review sites and blogs, which provide an endless supply of sharing opportunities and information while travelling (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Lee, & Tussyadiah, 2011).

Smart phone use blurs the boundaries between the physically and technologically present and creates new avenues for people to communicate while they are travelling (Jansson, 2007). The instant communication that is offered by these devices alters the previous ideas of time and space, which provide the structure for human experience. It can be assumed that vacation experiences are being fundamentally affected by these changes (Gretzel & Jamal, 2009) and that families need to negotiate technology use on vacation so that it does not deter from the family experience and bonding.

Conceptual Development

The aim of this research is to understand the effect that smart phones are having on family bonding using a family systems perspective as the theoretical lens. Family systems theory suggests that members of the family are all interdependent and interactions between them create an open and continuous system that is always being influenced by the environment (Hill, 1971). Family systems are self-regulating, open systems and the added technological component converts inputs and outputs from the family members and plays a major role in self-

regulating within the system (Trist, 1981). In this case, the smart phone is a technological system inside the family system and interactions with each other and the smart phone will be discussed and observed. Therefore, the first research objective is to discover if and how families negotiate and/or regulate smart phone use within the family system.

Family Systems Theory is based on General System Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) which has some core assumptions applicable to all systems. These assumptions include that a system must be comprehended as a whole rather than individual parts and that human systems are distinctive in their ability to have self-reflexivity. Hill (1971) further states that the family unit is usually a task performing and adaptive group. This adaptability indicates that families tend to seek successful solutions to problems and then adapt those solutions to become normative behaviour (Cheal, 1991). Ackoff & Emery (1972) believe that purposeful systems have environments that affect the system, therefore each system can be considered to be a system within a greater supra-system. As a consequence, adaptive system behaviour within families will be analysed in reference to their smart phone use in two different environments, daily life and vacation, to see how they mediate this technology use within the family and if the environment of the family vacation acts as a catalyst for change in behaviour.

Proposed Methodology

This is a qualitative research project based on individual interviews and family group discussions. Due to the interdependent nature of families and family dynamics, a philosophical hermeneutic approach (Gadamer, 1977) is being used in an effort to understand both individual and global issues within the family group (Geertz, 1979). The hermeneutic approach, as a means to achieve an ethnographic understanding, can be explained as the circle of continuous tacking between the most minute details and global details to bring both into light concurrently (Geertz, 1979). With this approach, one must understand the whole of the intentions, beliefs, and context in order to understand the sentence, utterance, or act (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This form of research leads to thick descriptions, which Geertz (1979) describes as a multiplicity of complex structures which are knotted into one another.

The family today refers to a complex social reality (Popenoe, 2012) with different structures and cultural norms. This research will specifically look at family groups that have a traditional family at the core, with a mother and father and at least one child. The families will live in Australia or the USA, have a smart phone in the family and have vacationed within the last year.

The first stage of this study includes one-on-one interviews conducted face to face with family members aged six and above because children older than 5 can generally express their feelings and understand basic smart phone functions. These interviews will be semi-structured and have open ended questions to allow for flexibility. Questions will revolve around the topic of mobile technology use in their daily life, technology use among family and friends, and their feelings and emotions regarding smart phone technology use and behaviour. These interviews will be audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed by the researcher. The second and third part of the research will be family group discussions held in their home. Since this research is grounded in family systems, the family interview setting is important to view the interactions of the family members and gain some understanding of how they socialize and work together in their natural environment.

These interviews will be unstructured discussions with the topic being introduced at the beginning and the family encouraged to talk about how they use smart phones and other mobile technologies within their family and their feelings involving that use. The moderator will let the family discuss their feelings and then refer them back to different aspects of the topic for further discussion. Both topics will involve daily smart phone use in the family, how it is used, when and for what purpose, and who uses the smart phone, the difference being the context of their everyday life or family vacation. These group discussions will be recorded using a digital video camera then verbatim transcribed. The researcher will also employ a research journal, to write down any reflections, observations, and recurring themes immediately after the interviews are completed. Verbatim transcription will be done by the researcher along with notations about gestures, emotions, interactions, and other contextual elements of the interview. Since a thick description of these families is being sought, external cues and undertones will be noted to help to create a deeper understanding of the family dynamics. This study is a longitudinal study occurring over a year's time so the researcher will also seek out other times of observation of the family.

The recordings will be transcribed in Transana software, annotated and coded for themes. The analysis process is continuously dynamic as the researcher continues to refine the ideas and thoughts into themes. As themes are established, previous interviews will be reanalysed to look for similar themes that may have been undetected in the initial analyses.

Preliminary results

The initial stages of this research have been conducted and preliminary findings show that individuals are creating thresholds for their technology use. Depending on the situation, individuals have created boundaries for themselves for when it is okay to use technology, when it should be restricted or on silent and when it should be off or left at home. These results are also reflected in families, as families are creating boundaries for technology use within their home and daily lives. For example, the time spent around the dining table for nightly meals is a time when most families are choosing to not allow technology to interfere. Also, many parents set up restrictions on times of day or locations within the house that technology use can take place. While on vacation, technology use is dependent on the type of vacation. Many individuals and families are using camping as a way to leave technology behind and focus on their family. Conversely, when in the city, the smart phone is utilized as a dynamic tool for finding accommodation, navigation, information/activity searching and recommendations. The results so far suggest that families are trying to mitigate potentially negative effects of smart phone use in the family system by creating boundaries for use that are sensitive to time, location and type of family event. These boundaries are creating pockets of time that are allowing for uninterrupted family time and opportunities for bonding both in everyday life and on vacation.

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