Quotidian Ritual and Work-Life Balance: An Ethnography of Not Being There

JO-ANNE BICHARD
Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, Royal College of Art

PAULINA YURMAN
Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, Royal College of Art

DAVID KIRK
Culture Lab, Newcastle University

DAVID CHATTING
Culture Lab, Newcastle University

This paper reports on current interdisciplinary design research that explores values held by individuals in their performance of everyday or 'quotidian' rituals in family life. The work is focused on mobile workers who may be away from home and family for extended and/or regular periods of time. During the course of the research, a key hurdle that has arisen has revolved around gaining access to families for the purpose of conducting traditional ethnographic studies. For many mobile workers who are separated from the family on a regular basis, the idea of having an ethnographic researcher present during what becomes very limited and therefore sacrosanct family time has proved difficult to negotiate. Therefore the design researchers have had to develop more designerly means of engagement with 'the field site' through a series of design interventions that effectively provide forms of ethnographic data when both the researcher and the researched are away from the field site, namely the family home.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the rise in information communication technologies affording flexible working lives, being physically 'in the room' is still a major part of working practice, and for many operating beyond a local scale such presence may be regional, national and/or international, requiring dedicated time away from home and away from the daily rituals of family life. This research explores how these periods of separation are managed within wider considerations of work/life balance, and how digital technologies are aiding these periods of separation where the rituals of family life may jar with work schedules of the flexible mobile worker.

Family Rituals 2.0 was born from a UK Research Council funded 'Creativity Greenhouse'[1] event that took place in July 2012. The project was initially developed when the research team identified the daily rhythms and behaviours of family life, namely family rituals, as key features of family experience that have the potential to conflict with workplace demands especially in the networked era of being on-line and available at all time. The researchers framed the project around the need to understand the evolving nature of family rituals in order to support work-life balance in the digital age.

Family Rituals 2.0 is an ongoing interdisciplinary research project comprising Human Computer Interaction (HCI) researchers (Newcastle University), interaction and product designers (Newcastle University and Royal College of Art), geographers (University of the West Of England and Bournemouth University) and social and design anthropologists (Bournemouth University and Royal College of Art) that is exploring, through ethnographic methods, the value of quotidian rituals in maintaining family life when family members are separated. The project is funded for 24 months by the UK's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) as part of their Digital Economy Programme, and is due to conclude in April 2015[2].

Defining the Field

During the course of this research we have found it helpful to make clear the concepts we are working within. Therefore we provide a set of definitions that frame how we have conceived our research.

Mobile Worker

Current estimates for the worldwide 'mobile worker' population estimate that, as of 2008, it comprised 919.4 million people and accounted for 29% of the worldwide workforce. In 2013, the population of mobile workers was estimated to have risen to 1.19 billion and now accounted for nearly 35% of the workforce (IDC, 2010). However, the term for 'mobile worker' is noted as being somewhat nebulous, at most a quantification of the numbers of people who are working away from home is problematic to estimate as current UK national (Office of National Statistics) and international (International Labour Organisation) have no information on the numbers of people who are 'working away from home'.

---

[1] Creativity Greenhouse was itself a research project run by the University of Nottingham, funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), which aimed to explore the use of virtual reality technologies for supporting research funding 'sandpit' meetings. A virtual reality environment similar in principle to Second-Life, enabled researchers to take part in a set of exercises to help define project ideas, pull together research teams and to make funding pitches. This was all played out virtually by our avatars in a digital space and a series of digital breakout and private rooms for closer collaborative discussions.

[2] We are grateful for the support of the EPSRC grant number EP/K025678/1 in this research as well as that of our Family Rituals 2.0 colleagues; Professor Adele Ladkin, Dr Juliet Jain, Dr William Clayton and Dr Marina Marouda.

In contrast, business travel trends do provide some insight into the growth of a mobile workforce. Measured as a distinct sector for global tourist arrivals, figures show that in 2011 there were 983 million tourist arrivals of which 15% were for business purposes (UNWTO, 2012). In the UK the Office of National Statistics found that in 2011 business travel had grown by 3.1% (ONS, 2011). Yet these figures still provide only an insight into the rise of the mobile workforce, as not all business travellers will stay in hotels and be recorded. Some will use accommodation provided by employers, or make other arrangements, and are therefore hidden from the current representative figures. However, it can be suggested that the practices of working away from home and family is extensive and growing, not only in the UK but on a global level.

Family

The perception of what constitutes the 'family' is broad and shifting to encompass a variety of differing social structures and actors beyond those recognised in the western conception of the nuclear family (Chambers, 2012), yet 'family' is still considered the cornerstone of our social worlds. Although there is a distinct trend in modern industrial societies for single occupancy space and isolated living, for many people, the home is intimately linked to family, as we share space with those we form familial bonds with, regardless of potential kinship ties (Ibid, 2012).

Family Life

Nippert-Eng (1996) proposes that the boundaries between work and domestic life are becoming increasingly blurred, and that this is being accentuated by the rise of the networked society and the pervasiveness of digital technologies that impact on home life (Castells, 2009; Greenfield, 2006). Changes to patterns of living have also further exacerbated the tension between home and work with a shift towards increased mobility for the purposes of work and a somewhat nomadic arrangement within the home (Urry, 2007). Increasingly, family life may be disrupted by significant periods of absence in which digital technologies are used to mediate the between the absent family member and home life.

Family Quotidian Rituals

The study of ritual has a long history in anthropological literature, but has often focused on definition and taxonomy that suggest a concentration of descriptions around the construction of 'ritual'. Grimes (1985) notes that the focus on definition has produced an abundance of 'ritual types' that have left uncertainty in identifying rituals and their boundaries. Rituals have been framed in a variety of social worlds that include the religious and secular, political and civic, festivals and games, and whilst these typologies are important for organising the study of ritual, attention to more routinized quotidian ritual activity has become somewhat lost. The focus on defining ritual activity implies a definition of non-ritual activity, the distinction of which De Coppet (1992) argues is fundamental for shaping our values and social relations – this distinction is relative and hence 'assumes different forms in

different societies'. Given the complexity of the activity and actors, De Coppet suggests it is not possible to have a single universal definition of ritual.

Wolin and Bennett (1984) define family rituals as 'a symbolic form of communication that, owing to the satisfaction that family members experience through its repetition, is acted out in a systematic fashion over time'. Yet, they also identify the difficulty in defining the boundaries of where ritual begins and ends. Whilst notions of ritual may invoke concepts of the sacred and/or celebratory, etymologically ritual also invokes the mundane and the quotidian, as Caletrio (2013) asserts 'it is often the quotidian details that best reveal the vital pulse of the times, the sensuous, emotional and moral textures of everyday life at a certain historical time'.

Yurman *et al* (2014) find the 'grey area' of ritual boundaries a useful space 'to open design possibilities' and the Family Rituals 2.0 project seeks to explore how participation in domestic rituals of family life affects the absence and incorporation of the mobile worker. Our approach has focused on ritual action and practice to critically examine how meaning is derived from otherwise mundane activities. Our investigation has centred on how absent family members are integrated and incorporated into family life when away, so that they are seen as being 'present' in the family grouping through the process of ritual. Here the ritual practice not only reaffirms familial bonds but articulates relations of caring (Marouda, 2010), and aims to reveal not what people think about social relations but how they enact them in their daily lives.

METHODOLOGY

Seeking to critically understand the role of quotidian ritual in domestic and family life, the research has centered on understanding the ways in which ritual behaviour is impacted and other wise affected by digital technology. How do quotidian rituals accommodate work life balance and how can digital technologies be used to overcome barriers of engagement in domestic life when constrained by work-commitments? The research has been designed with adherence to value-centred technology design (Borning and Muller, 2012), which combines social science and design led methodologies, to explore the values held by participants in domestic ritual activity. The key ethnographic methods incorporated into the research include interviews, diary studies and participant observation combined with design led methods such as 'Cultural Probes' (Gaver *et al*, 1999).

The values held by participants and distilled from the field research are then used to develop (potentially low-fi) technology probes. These are bespoke artifacts, each created in response to the rituals identified within participants' families. These probes present the opportunity to be used reflexively to explore socio-technical relationships in our participating families, both in the role of ritual in family life and the impact technology has with regards to understanding of work/life balance.

The project includes a number of work streams incorporating a literature review, interdisciplinary research design including ethical considerations and recruitment timetables, a catalogue of existing technologies, stakeholder and family interviews, ethnographic case studies and design and technology probes. Each work stream has been designed to adhere to a timeline that incorporates traditional elements of academic research (including researcher

training), participant recruitment, ethnographic design data analysis and build of the probes and prototypes.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF NOT BEING THERE; THE RESEARCHER

Initially the research design was devised to recruit 30 families for in-depth interviews, with the aim of recruiting six of the thirty to take part in deeper ethnographic studies that incorporated design led methodologies (figure 1).
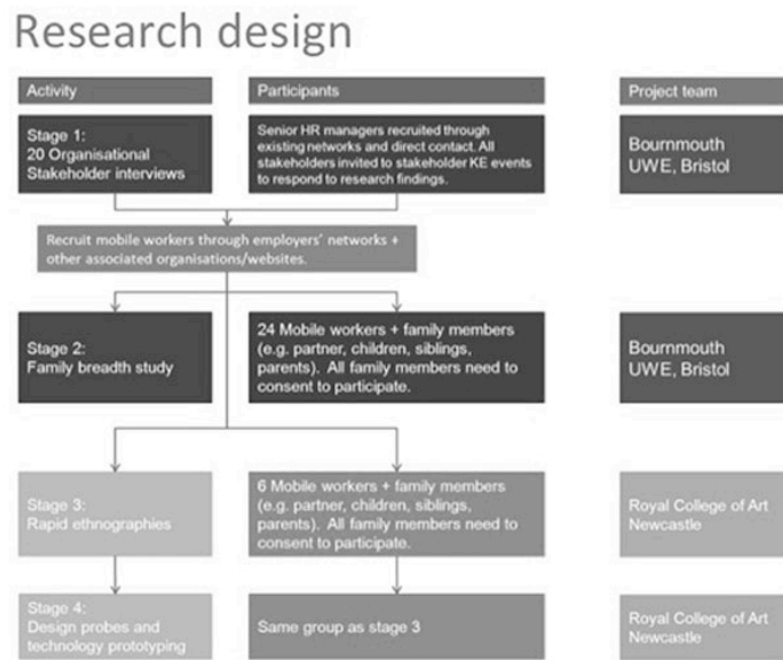
Figure 1. Family Rituals 2.0 Research Design. Jain *et al*, Family Rituals 2.0 2013

Access to families to take part in the interviews and ethnographic elements of the project would be gained from a series of 20 stakeholder interviews with employers in relevant 'mobile worker' sectors such as hotel, construction and technology industries. Yet, it soon became apparent that a number of barriers to conducting the research would have to be overcome. Firstly, the stakeholders as 'gatekeepers' to mobile employees showed reluctance to allow researchers to access potential participants. Whilst happy to discuss the issue of work/life balance from an organisational perspective, granting access to wider organisation members became problematic. As this access was set within a fixed schedule of research it became central to the research team that 'other' recruitment opportunities were

explored. Secondly, as we gradually recruited families for the initial in-depth interviews, it also became apparent that scheduling these encounters would be difficult within the mobile workers time commitments. This became a major issue for the project in which the methodology had sought to conduct in-depth interviews with families of whom a few would take part in the ethnographic and design lead research that would be undertaken when all family members were present as well as in periods of seperation. Having realised this form of 'snowballing' for recruiting research participants would not work in the set time frame of the project, especially when considering the design time required for the bespoke technology development, the research team felt there was no option but to recruit for our own specific work programmes.

From Cultural Probe to Ethnographic Probe

With the recruitment for the project now split between work programmes, the design research team from the Royal College of Art and Newcastle University explored a number of mobile worker networks to recruit families to take part in the project. We conducted a series of interviews with 10 mobile workers to gain an understanding of their domestic and work life schedules as well as with the aim to recruit six to take place in the deeper ethnographic engagement. Initially, we had planned a key ethnographic encounter around a form of participant observation with the researcher being present in a key family ritual, a Sunday lunch, or if within the time frame of the research, a birthday or other such event which the family observed. However, the interviews revealed that after periods of separation, family time together was private and that allowing the researchers 'into this private space would be a sacrifice difficult to justify' (Yurman *et al*, 2014). From these 10 interviews, two families agreed to take part in the design led portions of the research, albeit without the presence of the design ethnographer and the participant observation element.

This presented a fresh challenge to the design team, how does design led ethnography collect data when the ethnographer is not present? And for that matter should design-ethnographers concern themselves with the kinds of engagement that more traditional ethnographers hold as critical to their practice. Afterall, researchers have been suggesting for many years that as designers we should not uncritically adopt the methods and agendas of the social sciences (Anderson, 1994). Perhaps therefore, a more designerly way of ethnographically engaging with the field-site could be found.

Either way, the research design had specified that we would initially deploy 'cultural probes' to sensitise the design team to the design space of family life. Cultural Probes were developed by Gaver et al (1999) for the collection of 'inspirational data… to stimulate imagination rather then define a set of problems' for designers (ibid,1999; 25). The probes consist of packages that may include maps, disposable cameras and other materials that have been designed 'to provoke inspirational responses' (ibid, 1999; 22) from research participants. They are left behind and completed in the absence of the design researcher. They help designers understand the participant's culture, and to help create design outcomes that are not 'irrelevant or arrogant' (ibid, 1999; 23), whilst also not constraining designers to briefs focused specifically on needs. Cultural probes aim to lead a discussion with research participants 'towards unexpected ideas' but not dominate the discussion (ibid, 1999; 23).

For the Family Rituals 2.0 design led research it was suggested that the cultural probes might be effectively redirected to become more ethnographic-like probes. This suggested that the kinds of information that they derived might move beyond the purely inspirational and aesthetic but give some insight as to routines and practices enacted by our participants. This required their acting in absentia of the ethnographer to capture both elements of the mobile workers' time away from home and of family life when they are away and reunited. The design of the probes for the mobile workers had to adhere to a number of specifics. The probes had to be portable and not contravene any baggage restriction for travel outside of the UK (i.e. involve liquids, flammables etc.), and were directed at exploring three phases of family life;

- What a family's life is like when they are together
- What life is like for the mobile worker when they are away
- What life at home is like with an absent family member

Exploring the first two points has been undertaken using our ethnographic probes consisting of a booklet with specific questions (figure 2), a list of photographs we would like them to take, a list of house rules and a like /dislike stamp with post-it notes so that they can identify items around the home that they like or dislike (figure 3).
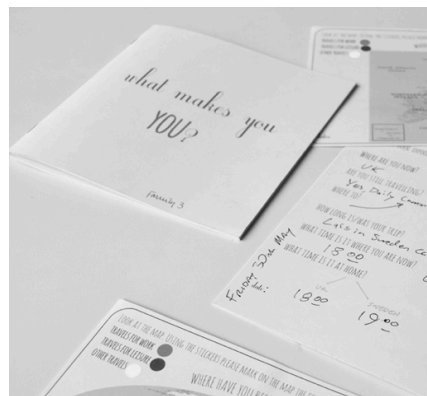
Figures 2 & 3. Booklets for the mobile workers to fill in when away from home and Like / Dislike probe. Photo Credit: Kirk, Family Rituals 2.0, 2014

By identifying items in the home, the research team are given a glimpse into the relations family members have with material objects in the home, their aesthetic sensibilities and a sense of what may be acceptable and unacceptable for the design of the technology probes. This is a key factor as it is important that the technology probes are accepted within the family and used within the research programme. To not consider the wider material artifacts in which the probe will be placed risks its rejection by the users.

The third point focusing around life at home without the family member/mobile worker has been more speculative in the design of the ethnographic probe. To gather this information the design team created a more interactive probe, which displays questions to the family when the mobile worker is away. The questions require written responses that the family write down and deposit in the probe and that are then collected when the absent family member returns. There is also an option for the answers to be e-mailed to the design team.

The shape and character of the probe has been changed throughout the project (figure 4), offering a range of interactive behaviours; from the obvious and predictable to ones more mysterious and random, in which messages may only be displayed for an hour, resulting in some being missed or ignored. The structural form factor changes, which are allowed by prototyping rapidly in low-fi materials such as cardboard, also allow the design team to experiment with the aesthetics of the probes allowing us to create objects which will resonate with participant's sense of style. This increases acceptability of them as slightly intrusive objects in the home.

Figure 4. Interactive probes change of shape and character. Photo Credit: Kirk, Family Rituals 2.0, 2014

The interactive probes have allowed the researchers to 'poke' into the way families might respond to technology, their perceptions of its acceptability, as well as experiment with ways to elicit participant responses. The interactive probes offer a more reflexive lens in to family life than the traditional cultural probes, and allow the design team to respond to emerging events in the world or within families to help foster a more reactive relationship with participants. This helps to build trust and empathy between the family and the design team and increases the participating families' sense of intrigue in participation around the notion of engaging with a new critical technology during the later technology probe phase.

A second ethnographic probe has also been developed to explore family life whilst the mobile worker is away. This probe focuses on a 'geography of emotion and activities'. Island and lake shaped cards along with a gridded blue poster were given to families to fill in based on the feelings and activities at home. Family members assigned emotions experienced and activities undertaken to the cards, which where then placed on the poster creating a family map of family life when the mobile worker is absent (figure 5). In addition each family member is asked to place a representation of themselves (by using a toy piece) and note their co-ordinates in the map. Here there were records of family members being in 'the island of boredom' at the beginning of the day but in the land of 'tea by the sofa whilst waiting for potatoes to boil' at the end of the day. This activity provides the research team with fragments of information about their disposition, the values that they place in everyday activities, as well as a sense of the families' attitudes to ambiguous open tasks, their creative input, emotional vocabulary, and the broader routines of family activities and quotidian rituals of their domestic lives.

Figure 5. Ethnographic probe into the 'geographies of emotions or activities'. Photo Credit: Yurman, Family Rituals 2.0, 2014

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF NOT BEING THERE; THE FAMILY

The ethnographic probes serve to act in absentia of the design ethnographer by collecting information that serves as creative inspiration for the design team, but also provide the research with an understanding of how to engage the families taking part in the study and what they find stimulating to do. Understanding these contexts has informed the design of the technology probes. Our initial findings suggest that regular separation and reunion can create a form of elastic distancing and approximation of home life that offers family members periods of reflection and an opportunity to see family life with a fresh

perspective. Given the continued periods of time away from family life for the mobile worker, such reflection takes place at regular intervals. Whilst certain aspects of family life are reflected upon, there is also acceptance that some significant events are missed, but that separation can offer opportunities to arrange key family rituals that may be difficult to do when the family is consistently together.

We also noted distinct rhythms of family life dependent on the length or frequency of absence of the mobile worker (figure 6). These cycles involved; preparing for separation, separation, preparing for re-union and re-union and re-adaptation to family life together, and appear more frequently for mobile workers who frequently travel, then those who travel less often but are away for longer periods of time. By mapping these rhythms the research highlights that, similarly with the complexity of defining ritual, the complexity of defining a mobile worker are equally tenuous, with distinct rhythms applied to each mobile worker and their family.
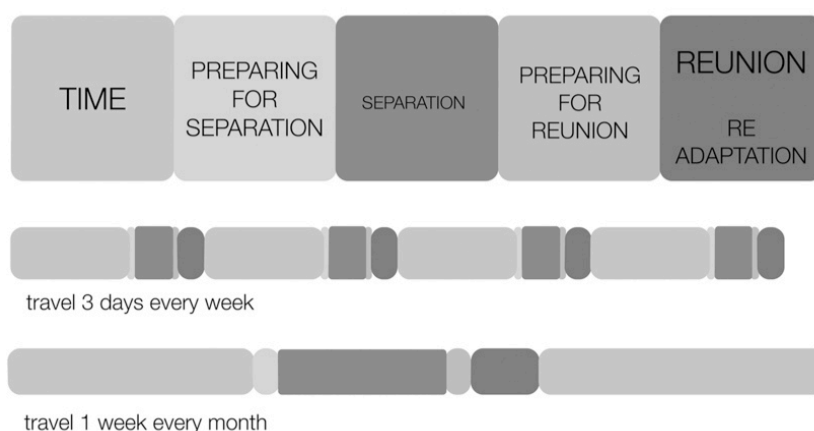

Figure 6. Rhythms of Mobile Worker and Family (Yurman et al, 2014).

There is also flexibility within these rhythms, with some mobile workers shifting from being away for short periods and then long periods. Creating a standard pattern and routine for some mobile workers maybe difficult and hence the quotidian rituals of family life may provide key anchors that allow for the elasticity of separation and reunion.

From Ethnographic Probe to Technology Probe

At this time of writing, we have received information from our ethnographic probes from four of our participant families. The more interactive probes are still with two of the families and we are actively recruiting a further two families.

'Cheers'

Our encounter with our first family, a husband and wife with a young child, the husband being the mobile worker who travels extensively in the United Kingdom revealed shared pleasures and frustrations during periods of separation. This family shared their pleasure in socializing together through drinking (figure 7), and the frustration on being separated of not being able to 'drink together', especially when the mobile worker is away and has the opportunity to be more 'social' whilst the partner takes care of the home and their young child. For this family our technology probe has, from insights gained from the couple's sense of humour and playfulness, sought to bring them together whilst apart.

Under the working title 'Cheers' the technology probe comprises a bottle opener that will be used by the mobile worker within his own quotidian ritual of having a drink after work, send a signal to the family home to be picked up by a unit to dispense a glass of wine to the partner (figure 8).

Figure 7. Montage of ethnographic 'like/dislike' photos from family 1. Photo Credit: Family Rituals 2.0
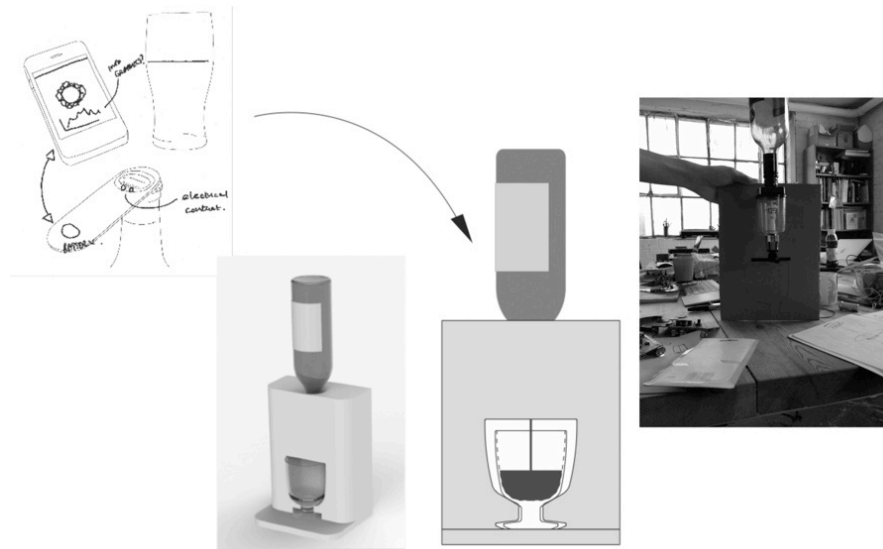
Figure 8. 'Cheers' technology probe development and prototype. Photo Credit Yurman & Chatting, 2014

This probe is currently in the final stages of testing and will deployed to the family to live with them for a period coinciding with the mobile workers absence from the family home.

'Anticipation'

Our second family comprised of a same sex couple of which one travelled frequently abroad for work purposes. Family two had a specific sense of design, which suggested a modernist aesthetic; their flat was orderly and displayed a preference for co-ordinating monochrome decoration. When asked what they disliked about their flat they were quite taken aback and initially responded that there was nothing in there they disliked. On further reflection they did reveal elements they were not entirely pleased with. Interestingly, their periods of separation revealed an anticipation of being reunited and doing so through a trip away from the family home that they would take together.

For family two we have taken 'anticipation' as the trope from which to focus the technology probe. This will be reminiscent of a airport departure board but will display a countdown until the family are reunited and take their own trip away. This countdown will also be conveyed to the mobile worker through his mobile phone (figure 9).

Figure 9. 'Anticipation' technology probe development and suggested placing in the home. Photo Credit Yurman & Chatting, 2014

REFLECTIONS TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

As this work is currently ongoing, it would be somewhat premature to make conclusions at this stage. The aim of the research has been to understand the nature of quotidian family rituals for mobile workers and the role digital technologies can and do play. It is worth noting that all the families so far involved in the design work have access to smartphones and regularly use social networking and Skype to keep in touch.

Each family has revealed a specific family life and prominent characteristics based around the movements of the mobile worker and their specific family unit (with young children, with older children, with no children). The ethnographic probes have sought to reveal the family's attitude to separation – is it an opportunity to do things they don't do together or is it disruption of family life? Each family involved in the project will receive a bespoke design based on the creative information collected from the ethnographic probes, which may reveal new patterns of communication. The technology probes are not conceived as solutions, rather they are tools to help the research bring materiality to themes, insights and patterns that may lie dormant within the families of mobile workers.

The ethnography of not being there also highlights the difficulty of undertaking research within the private space of the family. The research investigators have extensive experience of working in ethnographic research, often in sensitive and highly personal areas (Bichard's work on personal experience of toileting, Marouda's work in perceptions of death), yet have found the sanctity of the family and the privacy of the home hard to

penetrate. The project does offer 'incentives'[3] for taking part, but has not proved an incentive against valuable and sometimes limited family time. For the research team this has proved problematic given the timeframes in which the research and design development has been set to take place, under the stringent guidelines and timetables of UK Research Council funding.

To collect information in the absence of the ethnographer we have re-focused cultural probes to act as ethnographic probes that serve two functions; firstly to collect data on the everyday activities of the families including emotional aspects. Secondly, to provide that data in a form that can be used creatively by the design researchers, from product and interactive design, within the team. These have proved invaluable in achieving a research methodology that has proved to be difficult to negotiate, whilst also providing useful insights that might not have been revealed in the standard participant observation method.

Jo-Anne Bichard is a Senior Research Fellow at the Royal College of Art and leader of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design's Work and City Lab. She works with designers in creating ethnographic encounters for participatory design, lectures on Design Anthropology and is completing a PhD in Architectural Studies. Jo-anne.bichard@rca.ac.uk

Paulina Yurman is a Royal College of Art Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design Research Associate on the Family Rituals 2.0 project. She is a designer / researcher, and is currently undertaking a PhD in Design at Goldsmiths College that explores design speculations in the material world of parenthood. Paulina.yurman@network.rca.ac.uk

David Kirk is Senior Lecturer in Experience-Centred Design, at Newcastle University's Culture Lab. He is Principal Investigator of Family Rituals 2.0 and holds a PhD in Computer Science. His research focuses on interactions between people, digital technologies and the environments, and designing new kinds of interactive computational technologies and services.

David Chatting is a Research Associate at Newcastle University's Culture Lab. He is a designer and technologist, who is interested in the "mundane future"; working in software and hardware, to explore the impact of emerging technologies in everyday lives. David.Chatting@ncl.ac.uk

REFERENCES CITED

Anderson, R.
1994   Representations and Requirements: The Value of Ethnography in System Design. *Human-Computer Interaction*. 9, 151-182.

Borning, A. and Muller, M.

---

[3] We offer our participants vouchers from a store of their choice and to a value of £100 for taking part in the project.

2012   *Next steps for value sensitive design*. Proc. Of ACM Conference on Human factors in
            Computing Systems (CHI'12) NY, USA 1125-1134.

Castells, M.
2009   *The Rise of the Networked Society: Information Age: Economy Society and
            Culture* (2nd Ed). Wiley-Blackwell

Chambers, D.
2012   *Sociology of Family Life*. Polity press

De Coppet, D. editor
1992   *Understanding Rituals*. Routledge.

Gaver, W., Dunne, A. and Pacenti, E.
1999   *Design: Cultural Probes*. Interactions 6:1 p21-29

Greenfield, A.
2006   *Everyware: The Dawining Age of Ubiquitous Computing*. New Riders

Grimes, R.
1985   *Research in Ritual Studies*. Scarecrow Press and the American Theological Society.

International Development Contractors (IDC)
2010   *Worldwide Worker population 2009-2013 Forecast*. Document no: 221309.

Maruda, M.
2010   *Lives Intimately Connected: The Dead and the Living in Contemporary Central Viet
            Nam* University of Edinburgh PhD Thesis.

Nippert-Eng, C.E.
 1996   *Home and Work: Negotiating Boundaries through Everyday Life*. University
            of Chicago Press
Office of National Statistics (ONS)
2011   *Travel Trends* http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_304661.pdf

Urry, J.
2007   *Mobilities*. Polity Press

Wolin, S. and Bennett, L.
1984   *Family Rituals*: Family Process Journal 23,3.

World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO)
2012   *UNWTO Tourism Highlights 2012 Edition*
            http://mkt.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/unwtohighlights12enhr.pdf

Yurman, P., Bichard, J., Kirk, D. and Chatting, D.
2014   *Capturing the Quotidian: what home life looks like at a distance.* Home-work:
        connections transitions and the wider world 24/6/2014, Geffreye Museum of
        the Home, London.

Web resources

Caletrio, J 2013
http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/caletrio/blog/2013/11/11/quotidian-rituals-age-mobility-1768 accessed 25 June 2014.