

Chapter 9

Technologies of Re-familization



Abstract In this chapter, the notion of re-familization is introduced, to allow for a better grasp of the cohesive impact of digital technologies in the context of extended and geographically distributed families. In the field of social policy, the notion of re-familization implies a reversal of the politics of de-familization that once was the hallmark of the golden-era welfare state. The argument is made that family-initiated uses of digital media and communication technology in response to (older) family members' daily help and care needs resonate well with the idea behind re-familization. In conclusion, the chapter presents several ways in which re-familization manifests itself in the everyday life of digital families.

Keywords Care and help needs · De-familization · Digital media · ICT · Re-familization · Social policy

While the concept of re-familization is not entirely new as such, it is new to media and communication studies. We will therefore do well to first take a quick look at where it comes from, before considering how it might be able to be useful for the study of digital families. Building upon the empirical investigations reported on in Part II, the chapter then goes on to propose that current digital media and communication technologies, which increasingly serve not just information-seeking needs, but also social and group communication needs, lend themselves well to being examined in connection with the contemporary phenomenon of re-familization, which entails people's increasing assumption of responsibility for taking care of their families and loved ones. At the same time, the broadening selection of communication devices and applications that extended families have at their disposal introduces new familial roles and responsibilities to ensure the proper functioning of the digital home. The claim is made that the concept of re-familization enables examination of these two phenomena in conjunction, especially in the Finnish context where the politics of re-familization has perhaps had more concrete bearings on individuals' lives than in many other places such as Italy and Slovenia, countries where public family benefits and services have never been as generously on offer or as extensively implemented.

From De-familization to Re-familization

In the field of social policy, the notion of re-familization implies an about-face, a complete reversal of the politics of de-familization that once was the hallmark of the golden-era welfare state. Between the late 1950s and the mid-1980s, economic growth and low dependency ratios allowed expanding the public investments in family services and benefits in several European countries. This policy of de-familization was designed to promote adult citizens' ability to uphold a certain material standard and live independently of family support (Bambra, 2007; Esping-Andersen, 1999). To promote women's participation in the labour market, the expanding welfare states broadened the scope of their family services and benefits, especially in the fields of childcare and elderly care, and developed mechanisms to supply paid maternity leave (Daly, 2011).

The politics of de-familization had a particularly profound impact in Scandinavian societies, where the states favoured universal family (and other) benefits and services over more selective modes of welfare provision. In contrast, the Italian welfare system, for instance, traditionally always favoured family care networks over public services. Indeed, the country's care provision system has been left more or less unreformed even in the more recent times when the care needs of families have started piling up due to rising retirement age and the ageing of the population (Ranci & Sabatinelli, 2014), Slovenia, on the other hand, is often presented as a showcase example of a post-socialist country successfully transitioning to the market economy. For den Dulk et al. (2011), this has meant that in Slovenia, the re-consolidation of work and family has been regarded as a personal matter that shall be supported by the state rather than the employer and private organizations. In the country, the state's support for families was able to continue after the transition to capitalism in the 1990s, thanks to a comparatively good economic growth, successful social dialogue and a gradual transition process to the market economy. Despite the relatively successful transition period, however, the gap between the formulated policies and people's actual ability to claim the services and benefits remained wide. In the early 2000s, the combined effects of privatization, re-structuration and tightened international competition began to be felt in the Slovenian labour market and economy, undermining rights related to parenthood that had withstood since the socialist era (Kanjuro-Mrčela & Černigoj-Sadar, 2011).

Following a period of persisting austerity that brought with it significant cutbacks even in the wealthiest welfare states, the politics of re-familization were then introduced in Europe in the 2000s (Starke, 2006). In several countries on the continent, the eligibility criteria for claiming public family services like childcare or elderly home care assistance were tightened, and the scope of services was circumscribed. As the states pulled back, the concept of re-familization was introduced to describe the growing responsibility of families in organizing care and assistance for their members with particular needs (e.g. Kröger & Bagnato, 2017; Leira, 2002).

To understand how such care is, or could be, provided from afar and en route, scholars have for many years already focused their studies on families with small

children and teenagers. Mobile communication technologies have proven invaluable and handy as tools for families to communicate both intra- and cross-generational intimacy within their sphere (Hjorth & Lim, 2012; Sawchuk & Crow, 2012). As has also been noted, specific rules concerning the use of technology (e.g. screen time restrictions) apply within the families, and unwritten rules concerning, for instance, the intra-family division of digital housekeeping chores, are not only tested and resisted but also contribute to family coherence and foster intimacy (Hjorth & Lim, 2012; Schofield Clark & Sywyj, 2012; Urry & Elliott, 2010). With the rise of the digital family, it has, moreover, turned out that the discussion, organization and monitoring of the daily help and care needs of older family members also take place using digital media and communication tools for the purpose (e.g. Petrovčič, Fortunati, Vehovar, Kavčič, & Dolničar, 2015; Tsai, Tsai, Wang, Chang, & Chu, 2010).

These sorts of family-initiated uses of digital media and communication technology that aim to resolve older family members' daily help and care needs are well in line with the aims of the European Union strategies and policy programmes viewing digital innovation as one way to empower the continent's citizenry in order to help keep older people healthy, independent and active (e.g. European Commission, 2017). Behind the catchword of citizen empowerment—a term hard for anyone to object to as such—there is, however, also an economic motive for promoting digitalization: the need to restrain public expenditure. Throughout Europe, digitalization of public services, including family, health and older-age care services, has been advanced parallel to governments' failure to provide publicly funded in-person help and care for families in need. The European Union has begun to promote more favourable conditions for lucrative e-health and telecare markets, stimulating also the growth of the so-called Silver Economy (e.g. European Commission, 2017, 2018; Ministry of Finance, 2018). In addition to the goodwill of the families, the EU seems to increasingly want to rely on markets as providers of technological innovations capable of making up for any shortcomings in, or otherwise shoring up, the public care provision in crisis. Combined with the vigorous promotion of e-health and remote-care technologies along with the digitalization of public services, it thus seems clear that any politics of re-familization can only presume even more solidarity in families than before and make family members even more dependent on one another's willingness to help in technological matters than what has been the case to date.

Technological Aspects of Re-familization¹

The proliferation of mobile phones and personal computers in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with the spread and intensification of the politics of de-familization in

¹Earlier versions of parts of this section were originally published in Hänninen, Taipale, & Korhonen (2018).

Europe and beyond. The rise of personal communication technology was predicted to lead to the dissolution of family solidarity, favouring as it was seen individual networking via person-to-person communication tools over more communal forms of interaction and communication (see, e.g. Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Mobile phones as the first genuinely mobile and portable communication tools brought with them the promise of the possibility to break loose from the binding ties of family. As Viken (2008) has pointed out, at the turn of the new millennium, it was even claimed that social networks more and more often rose as structures connecting specific roles, not persons as in traditional, densely knit families. Yet, perhaps the most striking example of how the politics of de-familization manifests itself in the practices of mobile communication technology use in families has to do with women's involvement in the labour market. Mobile phones were seen as particularly supportive of women's increased participation in the labour market, since they allowed them to manage their family affairs as well as their social and affectual relationships from a distance. The reverse side of this undeniable fact was, however, that the same mobile phone use also ended up reproducing many gender inequalities, as, in many places, it led to women's continuing to shoulder the main responsibility for family communication, even where men, too, armed with the exact same mobile communication tools, could have easily become more involved in the micro-coordination of family activities (see, e.g. Fortunati & Taipale, 2012; Rakow & Navarro, 1993).

The empirical materials discussed in this book are illustrative of the life of digital families more or less three decades after the introduction of the GSM standard and the commercialization of mobile phones. The evidence these materials offer suggests that in countries like Finland, where loosely connected extended families have been the norm for a long time already, new mobile and social media may have helped, at least somewhat, to revitalize family relationships. This change has been made possible by advances in personal media and communication technology that have opened up a possibility to engage in group-based communication using the equipment brought to the market. As we have seen, new one-to-many communication channels such as WhatsApp (see Chap. 7) open up entirely new ways of keeping a large number of family members, if not the entire family, connected (see also, e.g. Castells, 2010; Ling & Lai, 2016). Today, it no longer matters how large or geographically dispersed the family might be, as new group messaging and video conferencing technologies allow contacting all of its members at once, with no extra effort comparable to that required in one-to-one communication (Hänninen et al., 2018; Neustaedter, Harrison, & Sellen, 2013). Moreover, in technologically advanced countries, older family members' greater involvement in these new modes of communication has allowed their participation also in intra-family messaging groups and social media platforms. In this study, that was the case most prominently in the families in Finland. In contrast, especially in Slovenia, there was in many cases basically no need at all to engage in intensive online family interaction or chat group activities, as the three-generation families common in the country were socially tightly knit and physically closely connected anyway.

In the empirical analyses in this book, several ways for re-familization to manifest itself in the everyday life of digital families could be identified. First, members of

digital families, especially in Finland, consistently found the new forms and channels of communication to have increased intra-family communication among them (see also Hänninen et al., 2018). The key informants who had moved away from home some years ago (such as the Finnish Emma, aged 24) pointed out how there had been considerably less communication among their family members earlier, before they had started using group-based communication tools and social media platforms. In particular, exchange of small messages among family members was seen as an act of caring for others. As family gatherings were not very frequent, it was thought of as important to know-how and what other family members were doing, wherever they happened to be or reside (e.g. the families of Maria, aged 24, and Marika, aged 20, in Finland). Moreover, when certain family members were not involved in the family's daily communication via digital technologies and applications, this was seen as something jeopardizing or directly undermining the unity of the family.

Second, given how the appropriation and maintenance of new digital technologies can impact the outlook and configuration of traditional family roles, re-familization can also be said to imply democratization of the family (see Hänninen et al., 2018). As older family members begin to rely, and even grow dependent, on younger members' expertise for technology purchases and, especially, assistance with software and application installation and maintenance, the family becomes functionally more consolidated and the voice of the young becomes better heard in it. Even though the economic authority of the family's breadwinner(s) was still emphasized even in this study, and the new responsibilities were not always experienced as unproblematic by the younger family members in it, all the informants, regardless of their age and generation, viewed this aspect of the re-familization as a development desirable for them.

Third, the rise of warm experts was another aspect of re-familization, one that was closely connected to the democratization of the family (see Hänninen et al., 2018). With ICTs becoming increasingly unavoidable as household items and essential for the smooth operation and effective management of the daily affairs of the family, warm experts had become an irreplaceable asset for many extended digital families. Indeed, even with the increasing intuitiveness and ease of use of the new products coming to the market, combined with the steady increase, across all age cohorts, in self-assessed digital skills over the years, the need for warm experts has not diminished in digital and other types of extended families (Olsson & Viscovi, 2018). Some explanations for this can be sought using a post-Mannheimian approach to generations that takes into account the intertwining of life-stage-specific needs and generation-specific ways of relating to new technologies (see Chap. 4). While it is, in general, the youngest and oldest people who are most dependent on the availability of external help, those in the oldest generations are typically also the ones most diverse as an age group, in terms of their physiological, psychological, social and functional traits (Nelson & Dannefer, 1992). What this 'aged heterogeneity' means is that, even if an entire generation would become digitally literate before it grows old, the help needs of many in it are nevertheless likely to increase steadily over time, leading to a greater variability in the help needs of older people as the unwanted effects of ageing,

reflected also in one's ability to use new technologies, do not anyhow victimize all individuals equally.

Fourth, re-familization in this study manifested itself also in the use of time. Recognizing others' needs, and especially then taking care of them, requires time. As seen in Chap. 5, warm experts devoted considerable amounts of time to providing technical assistance, teaching digital skills and sorting out technical problems in their digital families. When families were geographically dispersed, apart from longer, in-depth phone and video calls, regular exchange of small messages was taken as a sign of caring and one's availability to others. Frequently exchanging short messages, family members could stay constantly connected and maintain their sense of togetherness (cf. Cao, 2013). Family messaging thus provided a good example of the ways in which digital families could be actively 'done' through mobile communication.

Fifth, re-familization, to a certain extent at least, also meant increased internal solidarity for the digital families. In them, solidarity, understood as a strong sense of personal duty towards others (Ter Meuler & Wright, 2012), was manifested especially in a sense of responsibility for ensuring the proper functioning of new technologies and solving other family members' technical problems. This aspect of re-familization was particularly pronounced in Slovenia, where family ties were close and where the informants more often than elsewhere suggested that family members had a duty to help one another in the use of new technology. Despite clear country-specific differences on this issue, however, the feelings of solidarity were mainly related to the functional and associational aspects of digital technology use. This is in line with Peng et al. (2018) notion of digital solidarity, a term coined as an extension to association and functional solidarity when analysing mothers' attempts to stay connected with their grown-up children.

Sixth, it is worth reminding that re-familization is not always a positive process affecting everyone fairly or similarly. As Hänninen et al. (2018) have pointed out based on the same research material as that examined here, communication in digital families tends sometimes to become compartmentalized. In such cases, only family members with the necessary devices, right applications and sufficient digital skills, or those sharing the same communication style and preferences, get connected with one another digitally. Most often, the compartmentalization within the distributed extended families in this study meant that fathers and/or grandparents were left outside the circle of younger family members and their mother. These 'excluded' family members could nevertheless be active digital communication technology users, and hence otherwise be part of the digital family; it was only their drastically different or very limited communication practices that kept them in the outer circle of family's communication community. Another example of the uneven effects of familization was the asymmetrical distribution of the costs and benefits of help provision. The role and tasks of the warm expert tended to fall upon just one or two members of the family, making all others in it basically pure beneficiaries.

Seventh, the way and extent to which the above six aspects of re-familization were visible in the three countries in this study varied considerably. As already seen, this variation was due to the prevailing family structure and housing arrangements, the level of intergenerational solidarity, as well as families' preparedness to use different

media and communication technologies in each case. Although the families in all of these countries had more or less the same range of digital technologies and applications available to their use, they used the different affordances of these devices and applications accommodating them to their own country context. In Finland, where even the smallest families were geographically extremely scattered, families benefited most from group messaging and social media platforms that helped them reinforce and even revitalize family ties. In Italy, on the other hand, it was larger family networks involving cousins, aunts, uncles and even overseas family members that provided the stimulus for adopting new communication technologies. Even though the key informants in Italy did not as frequently as those in Finland live independently of their parents, they had larger circles of family members with whom to stay connected. Finally, Slovenia turned out to be a special case in many respects. In this small country, families were typically geographically concentrated, with all family members living in the same narrowly circumscribed area or even the same building. As a result of this family members' close proximity to one another, the Slovenian participants in this study expressed fewer needs for technology use that could foster family coherence or family unity. Frequent daily encounters with other family members, particularly older relatives living in the same building or on the same property, lent themselves especially well for fluent and everyday intergenerational counselling and instruction on digital technology use and maintenance. With these and other country specificities outlined in this book in mind, it would then be misleading and inaccurate to presume re-familization to have unfolded in, and affected, all the three countries, and beyond, to the same degree and in the same fashion.

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