

## A Review of *Intergenerational Connections in Digital Families*

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### Abstract

This review synthesizes Sakari Taipale's book *Intergenerational Connections in Digital Families* (Springer International Publishing, 2019), partially from an auto-ethnographic perspective. Borrowing from the book's structure, the review is divided into three parts. The first section examines the definitions of digital families and the role of everyday communication technologies in connecting such families. The second section critiques the interconnected roles of family members and generations in maintaining digital connections, especially through Taipale's revival of the notion of the "warm expert." The final section assesses the book's conclusions in the context of changing social policies. It also looks at the possibilities for future research in the domain of digital family studies (and, by extension, in digital humanities) that can germinate from Taipale's concise study.

As a "matricentric feminist" researcher, I am deeply interested in how mothers negotiate and maintain relationships within and outside the family (both immediate and extended) in ways that both stereotype and empower them, especially in an increasingly mediatized environment [O'Reilly 2016]. As a mother, I belong to a dispersed family where the immediate as well as extended members are scattered across urban locations in India, and where we stay closely connected through different WhatsApp groups. I, for instance, have separate WhatsApp groups for my immediate family (my partner and daughters), and for my extended family (a cousins' group), besides also staying in touch with my mother, brother and his family through WhatsApp chats, in addition to phone calls. Hence, it is from a scholarly as well as a personal perspective that I started to read Sakari Taipale's book, *Intergenerational Connections in Digital Families* (Springer International Publishing, 2019), which examines the use and impact of digital social media communication among family generations. Although Taipale addresses the mother's role in digital families, he moves beyond to explore the web of complex, multi-generational relationships that form modern families and traces the role of digital media in shaping and sustaining these relationships.

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### Defining Digital Families

Taipale's ethnographic research is based on extended group interviews conducted with sixty-six key respondents in Italy, Finland, and Slovenia in 2014 and 2015. He contextualizes his research against the rapid digitization of family life since the late 1980s and 1990s, limiting his observations to North America and Western Europe. Specifically, he notes a "general trend of families *consisting up to three generations* now [becoming] digitally increasingly connected" [Taipale 2019, 2] (emphases added). The way he chooses to define "family" affords his research both scope and uniqueness. He rejects the stereotypical notion of the urban nuclear family confined to one household, preferring to engage with the emerging phenomena of "numerous mixed and extended families made up of members regularly switching between households and belonging to many families at once" [Taipale 2019, 2]. That shift in definition offers him a research gap: most existing research on digital communication practices in families focuses on dyadic connections in one-household families, especially communication between young members or between children and parents. Intra-family, digital, group communication practices of multi-generational, multi-household, geographically distributed families are an under-researched area, and Taipale's research addresses this gap.

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Taipale examines the existing scholarship on extended families, referring to approximate terms like Rainie and

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Wellman's concept of "networked families" as a "good starting point for understanding the digitalization of family relationships" [Rainie and Wellman 2012] [Taipale 2019, 13]. However, such earlier definitions are mostly rooted in one-to-one communication technologies, and are thus too limited to accommodate the increasing popularity of group communication through social media networks within families. Building upon, and expanding, existing definitions, Taipale writes, "Digital family, as defined for the purposes of this book, is one form of distributed extended family, consisting of related individuals living in one or more households who utilize at least basic information and communication technologies and social media applications to stay connected and maintain a sense of unity despite no more than occasional in-person encounters between them. Families of this type are, in fact, only now developing and becoming visible, after older family members, grandparents in particular, have begun to adopt and make use of a larger variety of digital technologies for family communication" [Taipale 2019, 14]. His definition is flexible, accommodating a diverse range of family compositions beyond the immediate, from multiple generations living in a single household (like many of his respondents in Slovenia); to extended families that include cousins, aunts and uncles; to blended families that include step-relations; and dispersed families where children have moved out and may or may not be living with their own partners and/or children. Most significantly, in this fluid web of genetic, marital and even affective relationships, Taipale includes and explores the intra-family, "skipped-generation" communication between grandparents and grandchildren, a relation which is often excluded from "official European data" that focuses only on "first degree family relationships" [Taipale 2019, 16–7].

Examining the factors that led to the rise of the digital family, Taipale expectedly skims over the sociocultural transformations, like developments in Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) and the reconfigurations of patriarchal systems. Instead, he focuses on the advancements in communication technologies that have changed the ways families relate and connect to each other. He considers the swiftly changing mobile-phone-that-has-morphed-into-the-smartphone, where the latest model "grows old in just a couple of years," as a metaphor and metonym of the "fast pace of technological advancement" [Taipale 2019, 26]. Taipale uses Madianou and Miller's term "polymedia" to explain the "ever expanding catalogue of personal media technologies" as well as the "personalizable" content of smartphones that is accessible to members of digital families [Madianou and Miller 2012] [Taipale 2019, 27–8]. For families, personalization means that communication is often compartmentalized — children may use separate apps to connect with their parents and with their peers — and also that families may together choose specific apps like WhatsApp to form common interactive platforms. Digital families, thus, need increasingly larger numbers of digital appliances and technologies, as well as new skills and changing roles to be digitally ready and updated.

Although classic sociological theories focus on parents' roles in socialization, Taipale cites modern family studies research which explores the "two-way influences between older and younger family members" [Taipale 2019, 34]. Taipale believes two-way influences have not been adequately addressed because most existing research slants towards either the parents' influences or the children's agency. Taipale attempts to balance both aspects: how children teach some digital media use to their elders (smartphone and app use, but not e-banking or emails), whereas parents are increasingly more pro-technology at home. He also nuances this two-way support by exposing the escalation of conflict that sometimes accompanies it; by underscoring the context of wider social changes that has transformed conventional parent-child relations; and, also, by emphasizing the contextual contingency of any generalized conclusions. For instance, the eroding of parent-child hierarchies is not uniform across locations: Finland has more separation between adult children and parents than Slovenia or Italy. There are certain critical strategies that Taipale consistently deploys in the book: he takes a conclusion from established sociological research and either broadens its application or uses his triangular ethnographic research in Finland, Italy and Slovenia to indicate that most generalizations can be uneven or problematic.

In a book on intergenerational digital communications, it is expected that there will be a central chapter examining the concept of generation and the processes of generationing. Taipale recognizes the obsolescence of the conventional notion of kinship-based, lineage-oriented generation in families because of the rapid and diverse pluralization of family forms. He rejects the concept of "strict generational division" and considers a more flexible and processual "post-Mannheimian approach to generational identity" [Taipale 2019, 41]. Mannheim distinguished between generation as location (based on birth year) and as actuality (where generational potential is actualized when people belonging to a particular

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generation unit live through and experience certain historical events in similar ways) [Mannheim 1952]. Taipale attempts to “update Mannheim’s original conception” of generational identity by inserting an “*active process of ‘doing’*” behind the formation of every generation” [Taipale 2019, 49] (emphasis in original). This can occur through technology adoption and technology use in families. Taipale considers generationing as a life-course-long process which occurs as families are reconfigured over and over; for instance, when a person retires, he may need to stay in touch with his family through Skype even though he might never have needed it before. Instead of staying locked in generational binaries like digital natives and digital immigrants, Taipale urges for a more integrated approach that understands and examines how “each cohort generation has no choice but to over and over again reassess its technological self-understanding and reconsider its relative position vis-à-vis other generations, as new digital tools, applications and services are constantly being introduced that soon become perquisites for a well-functioning independent life” [Taipale 2019, 51]. Taipale mostly uses ethnographic methods like interviews to study how family generationing processes are impacted through the everyday learning and use of digital media. However, these changes in digital families may also be studied through a digital humanities approach: for instance, by using methods of “digital pedagogy” and “digital literacy” to understand the uneven digital learning processes and outcomes in family generations [Kennedy 2017, par.2]. Analysing everyday digital learning within families through digital humanities methods would also perhaps open up possibilities for applying such pedagogic tools to improve digital learning in family generational cohorts.

## The Gendered Role of Warm Experts

In the second part of his book, Taipale continues his critical strategy of re-contextualizing and nuancing current theoretical concepts, as he attempts to articulate the new roles and everyday practices that are shaping digital families. One of the pivotal concepts that Taipale revisits is the role of the “warm expert,” Maria Bakardjieva’s term for “an Internet/computer technology expert in the professional sense or simply in a relative sense” who is in a “close personal relationship” with, and is “immediately accessible” to, the “less knowledgeable other” (in contrast with the cold expert — the external professional helper) [Bakardjieva 2005, 99]. Taipale deploys the concept of the warm expert to analyse the digital family relations that he researches, and he concludes that there are one or two younger family members in most families who are assigned the role of warm experts. These experts help to improve or sustain the digital skills of older members.

Warm experts may be physically present and may co-use digital technologies and applications with older members (for instance, grandchildren using Skype when visiting grandparents), or, they may be proxy users for older members who are unable to learn new digital skills (like paying bills online). Taipale’s research indicates that most warm experts are youth between 20-35 years helping their parents or older siblings; some are “skipped-generation warm experts,” who provide help to grandparents without parents getting involved; and sometimes, even, older family members are acting as warm experts “for their age-mates” especially if they lived in the same household [Taipale 2019, 66]. In countries like Slovenia, where multi-generation families stay in the same household, help-giving and help-taking between warm experts and others are organic; whereas in dispersed families in Finland, help is often given via the telephone. Taipale also explores the complex affects generated through the warm expert-novice relationships. While most warm experts feel a sense of reward, some do occasionally feel frustrated, especially at the need to repeat instructions multiple times or at the excessive time taken by novices. Conversely, the older generation learners are sometimes dissatisfied with the limited expertise of the warm experts. Taipale’s recuperation of the role of the warm expert resonates with me as a digital family member, as I recall learning how to navigate smartphone apps from my often-impatient daughters, and as I recall both me and them being more patient in teaching my mother how to use Facebook and WhatsApp.

Along with rejuvenating the notion of the warm expert, Taipale introduces the concept of digital housekeeping, referring to all the responsibilities and tasks required for the functioning of the digital family. As the digital housekeeper, the warm expert is consulted — in varying degrees — about most digital “hardware purchases” by the family, although the “cultural norm” is that parents make decisions regarding purchase of appliances, since they pay for them [Taipale 2019, 78]. Moreover, in all cases the warm experts are given responsibility for the proper functioning of the appliances, as well as for installing and teaching others about latest software and applications. However, Taipale’s research suggests that knowledge transfer within the family is often two-way, with the older generation, especially parents, teaching the younger members, including warm experts, about the risks of certain digital practices like data oversharing.

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Taipale's research uses the concepts of the warm expert and digital housekeeping to flip normative, hierarchical generational relations, and to propose a more fluid, intergenerational cooperation that "empowers younger family members, consolidates family connections and enhances solidarity across generations" [Taipale 2019, 85]. Taipale here restructures intergenerational relations through flexible digital concepts that allow him to reassign varied family dynamics into categorizable and analysable data. His concepts of warm experts and digital housekeeping recall Carlson's talk on data cleaning that demonstrates how computing processes aid in the study of human culture (and society), or Schöch's view of "smart data" which is "clean," "structured," "*selectively constructed*" and represents "*some aspects of a given object of humanistic inquiry*:" the object of inquiry, in this case, being the digital family as interpreted through the data and lens selected by Taipale [Carlson 2016] [Schöch 2013, par.8] (emphases in original).

However, Taipale is insistent about not replacing one homogenized norm with another generalized conclusion. He points out how gendered anomalies often exist even in the generationally radical concept of digital housekeeping. Some of his key respondents articulated "normative expectations" of motherhood: "Digitally skilled mothers sometimes considered themselves responsible for ensuring the proper functioning of software and applications in the family" [Taipale 2019, 83]. Taipale acknowledges the sense of empowerment such mothers feel, but does not limit himself to this one-dimensional perspective. He problematizes the extension of the "traditional role of mothers as the maintainers of the home and domestic social relationships" into the domain of "software care," because, with the rise of women's digital skills, even the task of digital housekeeping would perhaps "quietly end up being included" in the already time-consuming burden of domestic care work that women are expected to manage [Taipale 2019, 83]. As a matricentric feminist researcher, I wish that Taipale had further unpacked this gendered anomaly: *why* should the empowering function of the warm expert become burdensome for mothers? The answer, of course, is not that the work of digital housekeeping is specifically challenging for mothers; it is that the non-digital housekeeping and caregiving have always been considered the primary responsibility of mothers, and so any addition to that pre-existing workload is, often, an overload. My lived experience also pluralizes Taipale's argument: I am mostly so overloaded with domestic and professional work that the digital housekeeping is done by my partner, while our teenaged daughters are the warm experts. Conversely, it is only when the non-digital domestic housekeeping is shared by others (when the partner cooks, for instance), that I can devote some time to digital housekeeping or communicating. Readers will do well to reflect on how more "visible feminism" [Wernimont 2013] around the use of personal technologies would shift the assignments and everyday assumptions of roles.

Taipale does, however, reveal other findings that are significant from a motherhood studies perspective. In his analysis of the increasing uses of WhatsApp in intra-family communication, he notes how this multimodal, scalable, private, instant messenger service enables both dyadic and also larger group communication between family members. For Taipale, the "larger meaning of sharing and exchanging small messages, photos and video clips" on WhatsApp resides in the insertion and expansion of the ethics of "sharing as caring" into the everyday family digital space [Taipale 2019, 95]. Taipale's research indicates that this sharing-as-caring aspect of WhatsApp communication is usually gendered as it is most visible in mother-daughter interactions. Many of his respondents emphasized the centrality of mothers in creating and maintaining WhatsApp groups as opposed to fathers' more limited involvement. For Taipale, this finding consolidates his earlier argument about the gendered inequities of digital housekeeping functions. Therefore, even specific technologies like WhatsApp emerge as "new forms of immaterial labour" or care work that is gendered [Taipale 2019, 93].

## Implications of Re-familization

Moving around feminist analyses of intra-family digital communication, Taipale chooses to probe deeper by using Bengtson and Roberts's model of intergenerational solidarity [Bengtson and Roberts 1991]. Bengtson and Roberts contend that there are six types of solidarity within families: associational solidarity (spontaneous and ritual forms of communication); affectual solidarity (exchange of emotions and sentiments like trust); functional solidarity (exchange of help); normative solidarity (endorsement of family obligations); consensual solidarity (shared beliefs, etc), and structural solidarity (availability of family members, which depends on physical proximity and health). Taipale argues that digital families demonstrate these solidarities to varying degrees, as new media communication technologies are mostly associated with affectual, associational and functional forms of intergenerational solidarity. Forming of family WhatsApp

groups is an action based on associational solidarity; the inclusion or exclusion of family members from family WhatsApp groups depend on the affectual solidarity within groups; whereas functional solidarity is evident in, for instance, grandchildren providing intergenerational digital knowledge and help to grandparents. However, Taipale is careful never to flatten his research findings. He stresses the differences in WhatsApp use in the three countries where his research is conducted. Finland has small-sized, scattered families that use group messaging services to reinforce family ties. In Italy, family WhatsApp groups are larger, including cousins, aunts, uncles, even those who live abroad. In Slovenia, family members often live in close proximity, and consequently do not feel the need for digital connections — this is distinct from other digital skills and practices — as much as the others.

Grounded in the theory of intergenerational solidarities, and acknowledging the differences in the various respondents, Taipale introduces the “notion of re-familization” to understand the “cohesive impact of digital technologies in the context of extended and geographically distributed families;” he politicizes this notion by contextualizing the current social thrust on re-familization against the earlier policies of de-familization pursued by welfare states [Taipale 2019, 117]. De-familization refers to the combination of social policies between 1950s to the late 1980s that promoted increased participation by women in workplaces and independence of the citizenry through governmental spending on welfare measures like childcare, elderly care, and paid maternity leave. In contrast, the European Union’s post-1980s thrust on re-familization, which claims to promote “citizen empowerment” through policies accelerating digitalization, is rooted in “the need to restrain public expenditure” [Taipale 2019, 119]. Taipale notes how re-familization manifests itself both positively and problematically through his research findings. Generational hierarchies in digital families are often democratized through the rise of warm experts; members spend more time and effort in “doing” families; the internal, intergenerational solidarities within digital families increase. However, Taipale also notes the unevenness in re-familization in the three countries studied. He notes the continuation of inequities marking re-familization, as “fathers and grandparents are left out while mother-children communicate” [Taipale 2019, 122].

Taipale mentions the digital skills gap that exists between older and younger generations, and also between the less educated and more educated members in families. However (and perhaps expectedly), there is no mention of the digital divide that is so marked in countries like India, where I am located. Even his choice of respondents excludes ethnic minorities or immigrants. This may be considered a limitation, but it also helps in sharpening the focus of his investigations on his selected group of ethnic-majority digital families in Finland, Italy and Slovenia that may be multi-generational, blended, extended, and distributed. In Taipale’s concise book, each chapter has an abstract, keywords and a separate references section. It is, according to the publisher’s strategy, explicitly directed towards a mixed readership of students, lay readers, and researchers. The heterogeneous target readership perhaps accounts for the repetitiveness of certain concepts, arguments and conclusions throughout the book. The book also reads somewhat drily, without the conversational flows and narrative interest that often mark interview-based ethnographic research. Taipale’s interview extracts are inserted within his analyses in specifically marked sections, and they are not integrated into the flow of the writing. We do not get to know the fleshed-out “stories” of the respondents, even those whose quotes appear multiple times in the book. In contrast, Julie Wilson and Emily Yochim’s recent book, *Women’s Work and Digital Media*, develops the life stories of the mothers interviewed by the researchers, and almost each chapter begins with a narrative probe into the life of a mother [Wilson and Yochim 2017]. As a digital humanist, I wish that the rigid structure of Taipale’s book had flexed enough to document and narrate the nascent stories of the respondents.

Despite the structural and stylistic stiffness, the book adds significant insights to the emerging scholarship about digital communication and family, which is where Taipale locates his research. He moves beyond earlier research that focuses on technology use by individuals or by diasporic/transnational families, and focuses on studying the everyday use of digital media in families. Unlike existing research which often concludes that digital media has negatively impacted the affective, intimate relations between family members, Taipale takes a moderate, balanced view in his study of linkages between digital connections and caring relationships within families. In his concluding chapter, Taipale suggests that further research may be done to “investigate how caring relationships are played out in practice in the digital family” or on “any possible positive long-term effects of the help and care provided by warm experts” [Taipale 2019, 129]. Early on in the book, Taipale emphasized the concept of “doing family” rather than “being family,” configuring family as asynchronous, always-in-process, and mediated through communication technologies: his aim, he states, is “to promote

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thinking that deviates from that represented by the individual networking and one-household approaches" [Taipale 2019, 17]. His research is exclusively focused on intra-family use of ICTs and social media connections, and his definition of the digital family includes multiple generations, relations and households. This flexible definition of the digital family opens up other domains of research into the processes and connections that "do" families. For instance, Taipale acknowledges that although use of WhatsApp between peer-to-peer groups among children and youth have been documented, the growing use of WhatsApp in "the everyday life of extended families is still an unexplored territory" [Taipale 2019, 89]. This indicates potentialities of research at various intersections of relationships (families/peers) and technologies (newer forms of social media) that allow participants to fulfil the needs of social bonding rather than merely exchanging information. I know my own story — the frequent updates, messages and video-chats that my partner, daughters and I have several times every day are essential in sustaining and strengthening the bonds among us. I know of so many similar emerging stories that are undocumented and under-researched. As a matricentric feminist scholar and a mother belonging to a dispersed, digital family located in South Asia, Taipale's work makes me hope for further research that narrates, compares and theorizes our shared yet unique experiences.

There are several possibilities for further research that extends digital family studies to digital humanities, and this can include scholarship with a matricentric feminist focus. Scholars have made persuasive arguments for including "genealogy and family history" in the cohort of humanities computing and digital humanities [Hoeve 2018]. There can be similar overlaps between digital humanities and the domains of digital family communication/learning or digital family/generational relations. To envision one such project (located in Taipale's research problem but moving away from his chosen ethnographic methods) we can archive, compare and analyse the data from anonymised WhatsApp conversations within or between family cohorts through digital humanities tools for data mining and text analysis, which may lead to new understandings of how the concepts of warm experts and digital housekeeping operate within digital families. Focusing on the quality and quantity of maternal involvement in these WhatsApp conversation-texts would constitute a much-needed matricentric feminist intervention. Similarly, digital family relations, networks, learning (and other ways of "doing" families) can be mapped and studied through other 'texts' such as mom-blogs or Facebook posts. Expanding the possibilities beyond social media texts, we may apply the findings regarding relational dynamics within digital families to analyses of family relations in literary texts studied in digital humanities. Many such interventions from multiple theoretical and multidisciplinary standpoints are possible in the imbrications of digital family studies and digital humanities. The Digital Humanities 2.0 Manifesto states that "Digital Humanities studies the cultural and social impact of new technologies as well as takes an active role in the design, implementation, interrogation, and subversion of these technologies" [Svensson 2012, par.78]. Taipale's ethnographic research studies the impact and implementation of new technologies in digital families, and future researchers of family studies and digital humanities can use it as a pivot or a springboard for many exciting and forward-looking explorations into family-digital interactions.

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