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The role of information and communication technologies in managing transition and sustaining women's health during their midlife years

By

Julie Dare
B.Sc (Library Technology)
B.Com (Hons)

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

This research has been motivated primarily by a desire to extend and enrich existing research on women's uses of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to manage relationships, and access and construct social support during their transitional midlife years. In doing so, this research addresses a gap in the literature on women's consumption of such technologies. Since the late 1980s, when several landmark studies investigated women's use of the telephone, there has been little systematic evaluation of the degree to which newer communication technologies have become integrated into women's communication practices.

Another key feature of this research is an examination of how 'midlife', as a stage of life characterised by several common transitions, is experienced by a group of women. These life experiences are modified by the availability of social support and, significantly for this research, by the communication conduits through which this support circulates. Given that midlife involves physical and emotional changes that may impact on a woman's sense of self, this period of transition can be a source of stress. Numerous studies have identified the critical role social support plays in helping individuals cope with stress. For women, social support is commonly manifested through female networks, maintained through face-to-face encounters, and increasingly through mediated communication channels. In a region as geographically isolated as Western Australia, where over 27% of the population were born overseas, the importance of communication technologies in facilitating access to dispersed social support networks is arguably even more critical.

The research procedure, drawing on a qualitative, interpretive methodological approach, involved 40 in-depth, one-on-one ethnographic interviews with women aged between 45 and 55. Initial findings indicated that while women are actively appropriating a range of online communication channels, there was a risk in limiting the research focus to women's use of the Internet, in isolation from their broader communication practices. In particular, this research makes clear that one significant aspect of women's uses of ICTs lies in how different communication channels meet the needs of women and their families at particular moments in their lives. At the midway mark in the lifecycle, many of the women interviewed are either consciously, or in some cases intuitively, employing particular communication channels to manage difficult or sensitive relationships; their choices often constrained by the communication needs and/or preferences of their aging parents and/or their own children.

Despite such constraints, this research provides strong evidence to suggest that midlife women are as adept at strategically appropriating multiple communication technologies to satisfy their own needs, as are many younger people. This is manifested in a variety of ways, from women's use of email as a safe conduit through which to maintain tenuous links with difficult siblings; to their strategic employment of email, instant messaging and webcam to foster a richer sense of connection with young adult children living thousands of kilometres away; through to their appropriation of a mix of 'old' and new channels such as face-to-face communication, the landline telephone, text messaging and email, as tools to help them manage their hectic lifestyles and sustain relationships with family and friends. Women's active appropriation of multiple communication channels is therefore critical to the ongoing maintenance of relationships and, by extension, the health and emotional wellbeing not only of the women themselves, but also their loved ones and friends.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

      (i)   incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

      (ii)   contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

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Lastly, but by no means least, I extend my deepest gratitude to the 40 women who generously found time in their busy lives to help me in my research. Their understanding, humour, wisdom and honesty are appreciated beyond words. This thesis is their story.

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Brief Biographies

Throughout this thesis I have quoted extensively from the interviews, with the aim of increasing transparency by allowing the participants to 'speak for themselves'. In order to provide some context to these women's voices, I have provided brief biographies in Appendix 1. While identifying information has been removed or altered to maintain the participants' confidentiality, the biographies are nevertheless designed to provide a relatively accurate snapshot of these women's personal situation. I have also included a 'quick reference' guide to the interviewees in Appendix 1b, Who were the participants?

List of Tables

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1   Overview of Research Project

This project aims to extend and enrich existing research into the role of communication technologies in women's lives, by examining the ways in which information and communication technologies (ICTs), and in particular the Internet, are being used by Western Australian women to manage relationships, and access and construct social support during their transitional midlife years. Throughout this thesis, 'midlife' is used to refer to the period in women's lives between 45 and 55 years of age. This time period has been chosen as the focus of this research, as it is the age range during which Australian women are most likely to pass through menopause (M. Smith & Michalka, 2006, p. 3), and several other key midlife transitions such as the departure of young adult children from the family home and the ageing and death of parents. Given that midlife involves changes, both physically and psychologically, that may impact on a woman's sense of self, this period of transition can be a source of stress (Gilligan, 1982, p. 171). Numerous studies have identified the crucial role social support plays in helping individuals cope with stress (Westen, Burton, & Kowalski, 2006, p. 586). For women, social support is commonly manifested through female networks of relationships (Gilligan, p. 48). In the past, these networks were maintained primarily through face to face encounters. More recently, the pivotal role that both the telephone and Internet have played in facilitating women's communion has been highlighted (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001; Rakow, 1988, 1992). This research fills a gap in the literature by examining, through ethnographic interviews, how a group of Western Australian women are appropriating multiple communication technologies into their everyday lives. In doing so, this research acknowledges that communication research, and in particular research focused on Internet use, should move beyond a simplistic study of 'uses and effects', to a study grounded in the lived experiences of a definable group of people within a specific social context (D. Miller, Slater, & Suchman, 2004, p. 79).

This research contributes to an understanding of the communication practices and needs of midlife women in Western Australia, by referencing the degree to which the desire for communion and support motivates their behaviour during this transitional period, as well as documenting the communication channels through which they exchange care and support with others, and the social significance of those communication technologies to women's sense of physical and emotional wellbeing. A review of the literature related to midlife women and their use of the Internet suggests this is an area that is under-researched. The youngest cohort of baby boomers, all of whom are now aged over 45, are more likely than their older counterparts to be familiar and comfortable with

Internet communication. It is therefore timely to consider whether the current generation of midlife women have adopted the Internet as a tool to facilitate communion and exchange social support, in ways that are comparable with women's use of the telephone. In doing so, this research draws attention to the degree to which women's social interactions, "within which social support is implicitly embedded" (Nettleton, Pleace, Burrows, Muncer, & Loader, 2002, p. 177), are being mediated and enriched through multiple communication technologies, including online channels such as email. Ultimately, this research serves two valuable purposes: firstly, to provide a more nuanced perspective on the consumption of multiple communication technologies by a particular group of people in a particular context, and secondly, as an indication of the channels through which social support can be accessed and delivered to women during their transitional middle years.

1.2   Research Objectives and Questions

1.2.1   Primary research objective

To identify the ways in which women in the target group are using the Internet as a tool to manage family and social relationships, and give and receive social support during their midlife years

1.2.2   Specific research questions

1. Is the Internet being used by women in the target group to maintain and reinforce existing familial and social relationships?

2. Is the Internet being used by women in the target group to extend their familial and social networks?

3. Are women using the Internet to give and receive social support, and build and extend networks within which social support circulates?

1.3   Background to Research

The beginnings of this research project go back to 2003, when I began to teach an undergraduate communications unit, Technoculture, for Edith Cowan University's School of Communications and Multimedia. The unit explored the social and cultural implications of communication technologies, with a particular focus on how new ICTs such as the Internet were implicated in the mediated production of culture and the changing nature of social structures, conventions and concepts of gender and sexuality. While the unit content included more 'traditional' communication material such as theories of technology adoption and diffusion, it also drew on 'cyberculture' theorists including Sherry Turkle (1997), Howard Rheingold (2000) and Nancy Baym (1998) to interrogate topics such as the construction of identity and subjectivity, and the emergence of online communities, in various electronic environments. Much of the cyberculture theory at that time

suggested that the novel ways in which people used this new communication space were largely driven by the affordances the Internet offered. Thus opportunities to interact anonymously opened the door for identity play and gender swapping, the implications of which, as Nancy Baym suggests, were "theoretically intoxicating" (2002, p. 41). Such technologically deterministic narratives also echoed in the use of metaphors such as the 'virtual community' and the 'electronic frontier'; metaphors which suggested that the opportunities afforded by computer-mediated communication (CMC) would lead to different, and by extension improved, forms of society emerging in cyberspace. Significantly, these online social collectives were often portrayed in cyberculture theory as having little relationship to the users' offline world (Woolgar, 2002, p. 3).

The student cohorts for Technoculture were predominantly young adults who, in general, considered themselves to be technologically literate, and expressed familiarity with using a range of new ICTs. However, over the six years that I taught Technoculture, it became apparent to me that there was a disconnect between some of the material that I was teaching, and the students' own experiences with new media. While Sherry Turkle's MIT students may have experimented with online identity play, some 10 years later my students were more concerned with downloading music and instant messaging their friends. Few had ever been involved in discussion forums or other forms of online community, and even fewer had ever heard of multiple user domains (MUDs). Moreover, the notion of trying out virtual personas in anonymous online environments was not even on their radar. The Internet did not symbolise for them a new 'frontier', a postmodern 'identity playground', or even an opportunity to communicate anonymously; in the intervening years since Turkle had documented her students' novel behaviour, 'cyberspace' appeared to have become so thoroughly domesticated within young people's everyday lives that for many, it did not represent the same transformational medium that it seemed to have been a decade earlier.

In common with the students, most of my online activity at that time was defined by the nature of my existing communication networks, which were based on work, family and social connections. Although I subscribed to discussion lists related to my work and study interests, I had neither the time nor the desire to become immersed in online communities. Thus for me, as for many of my students, the significance of the Internet and other new forms of media lay not in their ability to remove me intellectually and emotionally to an abstract digital space, but rather in the opportunities they offered for me to enhance my existing real world connections with family and friends. Over the six years that I taught Technoculture, I became increasingly interested in the banal and everyday applications of new media, which stood in stark contrast to many of the high profile studies published during the past decade. From my perspective, studies that focused on individuals' use of particular ICTs, without considering how that use may be shaped and constrained by a range of factors independent of the communication technology, were often only providing part of the story. For me, a more complete picture could only be achieved by also considering how new ICTs become normalised

within people's everyday communication practices, and by examining their use of technologies such as the Internet within the context of the relationships and social connections that frame human behaviour.

In early 2006 I came across a chapter by Daniel Miller, Don Slater and Lucy Suchman, in an edited collection of works examining the nature of scholarly research into the social impact of the Internet (D. Miller et al., 2004). This critique of Internet research over the last decade highlighted to me the need to develop 'location-specific' studies on Internet use. While Miller et al. acknowledge the value of early Internet research which focused on virtuality and identity, they stress that such research needs to be countered with studies which recognise that for other people, in other situations, Internet use is very much "continuous with and embedded in other social spaces" (2004, p. 78). In the past, research has tended to underplay the role that social context and users' individual circumstances and "experiences of use" (Woolgar, 2002, p. 4) play in Internet consumption, by constructing artificial boundaries between the 'real' and the 'virtual' (D. Miller et al., p. 79). Indeed, as Miller et al. note

> if we treat virtuality as a social accomplishment rather than as an assumed feature of the Internet, then there would be nothing odd in saying that the Internet is not a particularly virtual phenomenon when studied in relation to one group but that it might well be when studied in other contexts. (2004, p. 78)

As such, a fundamental goal from the beginning of this research has been to respond to the call by Miller et al. for researchers investigating new media to produce "more open-ended and multisited accounts of social processes and practices" (2004, p. 86). However, my interest in this field of research became more focused after coming across two ethnographic studies: Lana Rakow's Gender on the Line (1992), and Ann Moyal's Women and the Telephone (1989). Written before the widespread adoption of Internet technologies, these studies focused on women's use of the telephone, and reinforced to me the value in understanding ICT use as embedded within wider social practices and relationships (Rakow, 1992, p. 5). In particular, Rakow was concerned with tracing how gender is implicated in women's telephone use, and in documenting how "use of the telephone is related to a woman's social location and opportunities and her uses of talk" (1992, p. 9). Significantly, Rakow stressed the need to examine telephone use "in relationship to the network of people it holds together" (p. 5). Moyal's research, which represented the first time a national survey of women's telephone use had been conducted, considered the social implications of the telephone in women's lives, against the backdrop of a proposal by the Australian national telecommunications carrier Telecom to introduce timed local calls. As Moyal's research demonstrated, a large component of women's telephone use relates to care-giving activities; as such, women's communication practices need to be evaluated in terms of their contribution to the physical and emotional wellbeing of the community as a whole. Such a notion is conveyed in one informant's comments on the role of the telephone in helping her cope with the stresses of being a single parent: "What sustains me are lengthy late evening phone calls

to a small nucleus of friends (often in the same boat). Without this lifeline I would very likely be a candidate for suicide or hospitalisation" (1992, p. 60).

These studies struck a personal chord. As a woman in her 40s, juggling work, study and family responsibilities, as well as adapting to physical changes related to menopause, I recognised the important role communication technologies played in my life. Working predominantly from home, the Internet and telephone represented critical links to the outside world. True, being able to research from the comfort of my home was very convenient, and so too was being able to keep in touch with students via email. But, convenience aside, the real value for me lay in the ability to maintain a sense of a 'continuous connection' with family and friends. While I might be physically isolated much of the time, intellectually and emotionally I was not alone. Of particular value to me was email; the unobtrusive, time-saving qualities of email messages, as well as the capacity to distribute messages across social networks, fitted well with both my work and personal commitments. Email kept me connected with children who had moved interstate and overseas; enabled humorous anecdotes to circulate among my siblings and friends, and even opened new communication opportunities with my elderly father, who took to email with a passion. While telephone calls with my father were usually quick and to the point, often ending with "I'll just get Mum for you", through email a different quality of communication emerged. Writing this now, almost a year after my father's death, the memory of the funny little messages he used to send still brings a smile.

Underpinned by these personal experiences, the second key goal of this research project has been to examine in detail how other midlife women are using new communication technologies, such as the Internet, to help them negotiate midlife transitional experiences, and manage family and social relationships at a period in their lives when the nature and geography of those relationships are most likely to be in a state of flux. In doing so, this research addresses a gap in the literature on the domestic consumption of ICTs. Since Lana Rakow's and Ann Moyal's insightful research was carried out, there has been little systematic evaluation of the degree to which newer communication technologies might become integrated into women's lives and relationships. Such a lack of attention to women's communication practices is, unfortunately, all too reminiscent of earlier research into the consumption of communication technologies. As Lana Rakow noted some 17 years ago

> It is at once remarkable and unremarkable that women's relationship to the telephone should have gone so long without serious scholarly attention. It is remarkable because communication scholars and sociologists have long been interested in communication technologies and because the telephone is a communication technology assumed to have great importance to women. It is unremarkable because women's communication experiences have received little attention until the past one or two decades, when feminist scholars have come to value them. That the telephone has been seen as a trivial and beneficent technology says more about scholars' perception of women than about the telephone or women's experiences with it. (Rakow, 1992, pp. 1-2)

This dearth of scholarly attention to women's communication practices is all the more surprising, given evidence which indicates that women were primarily responsible for reconfiguring one of the most influential communication technologies of the Twentieth Century as a *social*, rather than a *business* tool. Women's appropriation of the landline telephone to facilitate social connections sat in marked contrast to the designers' and marketers' positioning of this new technology as a tool for businessmen (Aronson, 1977, p. 27). Such was the speed with which women adopted this new technology that within a mere two years of the widespread introduction of telephone exchanges in the United States, caricatures of female telephone users, demonstrating women's "special way" of using the new technology, had become part of popular culture (Brooks, 1977, p. 211).

Unfortunately, in the intervening years since Moyal's and Rakow's research was published, women's appropriation of ICTs has continued to be an under-researched topic. This is despite the fact that over the last two decades there has been considerable research on ICT use among a range of other groups, including children and teenagers (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski, 2006; d. boyd, 2008; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Ling, 2007; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2009)[1]; university and college students (Baym, Zhang, Kunkel, Ledbetter, & Lin, 2007; Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006; Quan-Haase, 2007); and young adults (Dimmick, Kline, & Stafford, 2000). Certainly the focus over the last five to ten years has been very much on children and young people's use of new communication channels such as the mobile telephone (Johnsen, 2003; Ling, 2007; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2009) and social networking sites (d. boyd, 2007; Lenhart, 2009, p. 1; Livingstone, 2008; Ofcom, 2008, p. 17). In part, this may be due to young people's apparent enthusiastic adoption of new technologies, along with the highly visible nature of many young people's communication practices, which have proven a tempting subject for both academic research and the popular press. Often this research constructs teenagers and young adults as being at the 'leading edge' in terms of technology adoption and appropriation (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005, p. 14), and their use of communication channels such as mobile telephones, instant messaging and social networking sites is positioned as edgy, innovative and technologically savvy (Lenhart et al., 2005, p. 20). This positioning of young adults as initiating, and in some ways controlling communication with family members, also extends to media representations. An advertising campaign run throughout 2009 by the Australian telecommunications company Telstra demonstrates this dynamic beautifully. The <u>Call Mum</u> television campaign depicts different scenarios aimed at encouraging youths and young adults to telephone their mothers, and in doing so casts women as passively waiting for their children to communicate with them (Telstra, 2009a). The notion that it may well be mothers who are active communication agents appears to be completely

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[1] danah boyd does not capitalise the first letter in either her Christian name or surname; I have followed this convention throughout this thesis.

overlooked, or perhaps does not fit well with Telstra's push to attract younger customers. Against these representations of young people's conspicuous consumption of technologies such as social network sites and mobile telephones, it's perhaps not surprising that the appropriation of ICTs by midlife women has struggled to attract significant academic interest. In contrast to adolescents' public performance of identity on <u>Facebook</u> or <u>MySpace,</u> women's use of ICTs, much of it within domestic settings, is perhaps not considered as 'sexy' or topical an area worthy of investigation.

The continuing focus on one segment of the population has unfortunately drawn attention away from how ICTs are consumed by users with very different motivations and social circumstances. In comparison to research on younger users, a much smaller number of studies have specifically considered women's engagement with new communication technologies (Holloway & Green, 2004; Matzko, 2002; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000; Rakow & Navarro, 1993; Yates & Lockley, 2008). For the most part, these studies have focused on women's use of particular ICTs, such as email (Holloway & Green, 2004) or the mobile telephone (Rakow & Navarro, 1993). While such analyses provide a valuable addition to communication research, their constrained focus limits the capacity of such accounts to develop a more comprehensive analysis of the ways in which new ICTs are integrated into women' existing communication repertoires and practices, and in turn, to highlight how those communication practices are shaped by the social context of women's lives. Indeed, as Jeffrey Boase notes, research which analyses ICT use in isolation from the personal networks which are sustained through those communication technologies "has made it difficult to evaluate the social significance of these technologies" (2008, p. 493).

The need for a more a holistic and contextualised approach to communication research has been noted by both Sless (1995) and Miller, Slater and Suchman (2004, p. 84). Almost 15 years ago David Sless emphasised the importance of the social context in understanding the use of communication technologies. According to Sless, "communication ecologies" are shaped by four key elements: *opportunities*, which encompass media channels or communication tools an individual has available to them; *abilities*, which refers to the degree to which individuals have the ability and capacity to use the various communication options available to them; *expenditure*, or how much an individual or household is able or prepared to spend on ICTs; and lastly *time*, which relates to the amount of time which may be allocated to various communication tasks, and how that time fits with other responsibilities and obligations (Sless, 1995, p. 7). More recently Jeffrey Boase has documented the degree to which multiple communication technologies are used by individuals, adopting the term "personal communication system" to encompass individual's use of multiple communication technologies, in concert with face-to-face contact, to connect with their personal networks (2008, p. 492). Significantly, Boase's research echoes Lana Rakow's call some 16 years earlier to consider communications media use by referencing the social networks that are held together through the technology (Rakow, 1992, p. 5). Likewise, Boase emphasises the need to examine ICT use from the

perspective of the relationships and social connections in which that use is embedded. As Boase notes, "the personal network approach is ideally suited for understanding the personal communication system because it takes the individual's relationships as its primary focus of analysis" (p. 493).

In recognition of the pivotal role the social context plays in shaping communication, my research analyses ICT use through the lens of the *relationships* which are sustained through women's active appropriation of multiple communication technologies. By adopting this innovative approach to an analysis of ICT consumption, this research represents a departure from the design of previous research studies which focus on women's use of particular communication technologies. In doing so, it highlights very different patterns of ICT consumption in comparison to research documenting ICT use among other population groups, such as children and teenagers. Arguably, such differences are driven not simply by the affordances offered by different communication technologies, but more particularly by the different social circumstances in which that use is embedded.

As an example of this dynamic, during the interviews it became very evident that the women viewed communication technologies as critical tools helping them not only to connect with family and friends, but also enabling them to access and exchange support during difficult times. Certainly, it should be noted that the majority of the women expressed the view that traditional communication channels such as face-to-face and the telephone fostered a much greater sense of emotional connection than text-based computer-mediated pathways. Nevertheless, the interviews provided strong evidence to suggest that in particular circumstances, the lack of social cues such as facial expressions, body posture, tone of voice and eye contact in CMC make channels such as email ideal for handling difficult and/or emotional situations. The degree to which mediated communication technologies can at times be perceived as a lifeline emerged clearly during one particular interview. As 45 year old Corinne explained to me, email was the only channel through which she could communicate with concerned friends during the days leading up to and after her father's death, as her emotions were too 'raw' for her to manage more traditional means of communication, such as face-to-face and the telephone. Email, stripped of the visual and audio cues accompanying more media rich communication channels, provided an opportunity for her friends to extend care and support in a way that best met Corinne's needs at a particularly difficult time in her life. While I could certainly appreciate how important email must have been for Corinne during this period, it wasn't until my own father became critically ill and subsequently passed away some 18 months after this interview that the value of email as a channel through which to receive love and support became particularly relevant to me. Email provided an opportunity for friends to send quick messages letting me know they cared, and enabled my siblings and I to support each other, in a more honest and emotionally expressive way than I believe would have been possible through conventional means such as the telephone. In addition, email opened up an unexpected channel of support and comfort. My father was a very gregarious man, and had a large circle of friends, as well as being involved in many groups, so

following his death my siblings and I either phoned or emailed many of these people advising them of his passing. Many emailed back, and shared their memories of their time spent with Dad. While I read these emails with tears streaming down my face, they were nevertheless very comforting. I don't believe this very valuable type of support could have been offered or accepted so easily through any other communication channel.

As this thesis argues, it is only through examining the communication practices of different and diverse groups of ICT users that a more multidimensional picture of the social significance of communication technologies can emerge. In listening to women's voices, this research reveals the complex processes which underlie women's communication practices and choices, and indicates more clearly the social significance of ICTs in their lives. Midlife women, often the pivot between young adult children moving out of home and ageing parents who are often becoming more dependent on their daughters, are likely to have very different communication needs and priorities than younger ICT users. Therefore, in examining in detail how a small group of midlife women have incorporated online communication technologies into their existing communication patterns and social networks, this research project provides a valuable addition to the existing body of communication research, and addresses critical gaps in the literature.

1.4 Structure of Thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. This first chapter aims to provide the reader with some background information, in order to firstly explain my personal interest in this topic, and secondly to situate this research project within the broader body of communication research. As noted previously, the seeds of this research project were sown some six years ago, when an invitation to teach an undergraduate communications unit raised my awareness of how important communication technologies are for connecting and sustaining social networks, particularly in a region as geographically remote and multicultural as Western Australia. However, much of the 'cyberculture' literature written during the 1990s and early 2000s didn't resonate with either my students or my own experiences with new media such as the Internet. This triggered an interest in examining how new media might be appropriated in more banal but no less socially significant ways. It seemed a natural progression from my interest in the everyday consumption of communication technologies, to propose a research project which aimed to address a gap in the literature on midlife women's use of ICTs, and to consider how women's use of communication technologies such as email might be implicated in the maintenance of relationships, and the access and exchange of social support during the transitional midlife years.

Chapter Two documents the broad methodological approach and specific research methods and strategies used in this project. This chapter outlines the rationale for adopting a qualitative,

interpretive epistemological stance, noting that the central aim of the project is to understand the meanings women ascribe to their use of online communication technologies, in the context of their wider communication practices, and the networks of relationships in which those practices are embedded. The chapter also makes reference to other theoretical perspectives which have informed this research project, and which have proven to be influential in shaping the nature of data collection and data analysis, and ultimately, research findings. A discussion on sampling strategies, data collection and data analysis techniques adopted in this research project is also included. As is likely the case with many research projects undertaken by novice researchers, this project was not without its difficulties and challenges. This chapter seeks to provide the reader with an overview of some of the practical problems and conceptual challenges I confronted during this project, in order to demonstrate the nature of problems experienced, as well as the ways in which these difficulties were resolved. This is not to suggest that all problems were resolved methodically and relatively painlessly. On the contrary, as is documented in Chapter Two, one of the most difficult conceptual difficulties encountered, which related to the fundamental way in which the data was coded and the research findings structured, was only resolved following a serendipitous conversation with a friend.

Chapter Three outlines the key transitional experiences characterising women's midlife years; experiences which include menopause, children moving out of home, changes in intimate relationships, and the impact of the ageing and death of parents. In essence, the information presented in this chapter represents a synthesis of existing theoretical, clinical and cultural constructions of midlife, contrasted and compared with personal accounts of midlife as experienced by the participants in this research project. This juxtaposition of academic and cultural representations of midlife, with contemporary empirical evidence, highlights at turns the similarities between participants' experiences and previous accounts of midlife, as well as the contradictions and diversity of the contemporary midlife experience. In doing so, this chapter provides a rich and multifaceted account of midlife as it is experienced by this group of Western Australian women.

Chapter Four continues the theme of transition, but this time turns the focus to the role that social support plays in helping women manage the stresses which may accompany midlife transitions such as the 'empty nest' and the ageing and death of parents. The chapter begins by defining the concept of social support, and highlights the role of social support in helping individuals manage changes in their lives. It then moves to a detailed discussion on the key sources of support in women's lives, with a particular focus on the role of women's friendships. Drawing on both the literature and my interview data as evidence, I argue that even where a woman is happily married, she is more likely to turn to a close female friend for emotional support. Female friendships are arguably even more important during times of crisis or transition, and as this research indicates, can be key sources of support during women's transitional midlife years. A brief discussion is included on the provision of formal support through health professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors. This

chapter concludes with a discussion on the role of computer-mediated support, as an adjunct to more traditional sources of support. I use the term 'computer-mediated support' here to identify social support which comes from outside women's existing relational and social networks, and which is accessed through computer-mediated channels such as informal support sites and discussion lists. The interviews provide strong evidence that for some women, in some circumstances, support delivered through computer-mediated channels offers a more appropriate form of care-giving and empathy than might be available through more traditional channels.

With the preceding two chapters concentrating on developing an overview of the types of experiences women face during their midlife years, and the meaning these experiences have in women's lives, Chapter Five moves the focus to a review of the literature on women's communication practices. However, rather than launching immediately into an analysis of existing communications research as it pertains to women, the chapter begins by firstly considering the factors and issues which motivate women to connect with others, whether through personal face-to-face contact, or through the range of mediated communication technologies contemporary western women now have at their disposal. While this may seem to be something of a detour from conventional communications research, I believe that in order to fully understand the social significance of communication technologies in women's lives, it is critical to contextualise their communication practices within their everyday lives, and to consider how socially designated roles may shape communication behaviours and choices. As such, the initial part of this chapter is concerned with outlining key theories relating to women's psychological development. A contrast is drawn between standard theories of psychological development which emphasise individuation and separation as essential to psychological maturity, with 'self in relation' theories propounded by feminist practitioners including Jean Baker Miller (1986) and Carol Gilligan (1982), which emphasise that female psychological development occurs *within* and contiguous *with* networks of connections and relationships. Such theories provide an alternative interpretation of women's behaviour, including their communication practices. This is followed by a discussion on the social construction of women as 'kin-keepers'; a concept which identifies women as the key family member responsible, through their communication activity, for maintaining family and social relationships. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to a detailed review of the literature relating to women's use of a range of ICTs to manage family and social relationships. In particular, attention is paid to the literature documenting women's use of the landline and mobile telephone, email, and social networking sites.

Having established an account of existing research into women's communication practices in Chapter Five, Chapter Six lays out a detailed description of how the women interviewed in *this* research project are appropriating multiple ICTs into their everyday lives. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, this chapter draws attention to the social significance of communication technologies to the 40 women interviewed as part of this research project. Here I need to digress again

a little, and explain that while initially this research project was focused on women's use of the Internet to help them manage relationships and access networks of support during their midlife years, it became apparent very early in the interviewing process that to focus on women's use of online communication channels, in isolation from their broader communication practices, was proving to be counterproductive to developing a clear understanding of the meanings of communication technologies in women's lives. Moreover, this narrow approach was not useful in identifying how different communication tools, including online channels such as email, are implicated in relationship maintenance behaviours. As it turned out, some of the most insightful discussions with the participants related to their reflections on why they preferred one communication channel over another for particular communication tasks. Thus this chapter begins by firstly outlining key theories used to explain individual media preferences, such as theories of social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p. 65); media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986, p. 560); and gratifications (Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 230), and then integrates this literature with empirical evidence from the interviews, which document how the women interviewed in this research project manage and negotiate their communication choices. This is followed by a detailed analysis of how the participants are using multiple communication channels to sustain, and in some cases enhance, familial and social relationships in their lives. In contrast to Chapter Five, which uses individual technologies as the main structuring device, this section of this chapter explores women's use of ICTs by referencing important relationships in their lives, including those with children, parents, partners, siblings and extended family, and friends. In doing so, a richer and more reflective account of the meaning of communication technologies in midlife women's lives emerges.

The final chapter of this thesis draws together the key findings of this research project. The aim here is to not only highlight the social significance of communication technologies in midlife women's lives, but to also re-emphasise to readers the critical role midlife women's communication activities play in sustaining family and social relationships, which contribute not only to women's own wellbeing, but also to the wellbeing and nurturance of their family and friends, as well as the broader community in general. This unpaid, and for the most part invisible 'labour of love', is, as Anne Else notes, the invisible safety net which underpins the growth and contribution of so many others (cited in Green, 2002, p. 212). The chapter begins with an overview of how the women view this midlife period in their lives. Given the tendency in many theoretical, clinical and cultural accounts to paint midlife as a difficult emotional and physical time in women's lives, I believe it is important to provide a space for the women's own perspectives on this period in their life to emerge. This is followed by recommendations for future research, and then a discussion on the significance of this research. Key areas of significance relate to women's awareness of opportunities and constraints offered by different media; their willingness to shape their communication to meet other people's needs, while at the same time demonstrating a capacity to leverage a range of ICTs to suit their own

circumstances; the technological competency demonstrated by many of the women, as evidenced through their appropriation of multiple communication technologies; and lastly the degree to which this research highlights key sources of support in midlife women's lives, and the role of ICTs in the circulation of this support within women's familial and social networks.

Interviews with the 40 women collaborating with this research reveal that they are active agents in the communication process, and have a great capacity and willingness to adopt multimodal communication practices in order to sustain important relationships in their lives, and achieve their own emotional and practical goals. As such, this research represents an important departure from many previous studies on media use, which have tended to focus on more topical subjects such as teenagers and young people (Baym et al., 2007; Boneva et al., 2006; d. boyd, 2008; Ling, 2007), or have positioned women as technologically naive and/or incompetent (Telstra, 2009, September 30), or reluctant ICT users (Ho, 2007). In contrast, by exploring the notion of women as adept and astute ICT users, this thesis aims to make an important contribution to the field of media and communications studies, and present an authentic analysis of the meanings of communication technologies in women's lives during their transitional midlife years.

Chapter Two
Methods and Materials

2.1   Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the broad methodological approach taken in this thesis, as well as the specific research methods and strategies adopted. This research project employs a qualitative, interpretive epistemological stance in order to investigate not only *how* the women interviewed in this project are appropriating multiple ICTs to help them manage relationships and exchange social support, but more importantly the meanings the women ascribe to different communication technologies, and the ways in which they are using ICTs to support family and social relationships. While the research has adopted a predominantly ethnographic methodology, it is also informed by both feminist and grounded theory perspectives. Such a hybrid approach has laid the groundwork for a rigorous and academically sound analysis to emerge. The analysis itself is framed by the three specific research questions:

1. Is the Internet being used by women in the target group to maintain and reinforce existing familial and social relationships?

2. Is the Internet being used by women in the target group to extend their familial and social networks?

3. Are women using the Internet to give and receive social support, and build and extend networks within which social support circulates?

The chapter begins by providing a rationale for the chosen methodological approach, and then moves to a detailed discussion of the different methodologies adopted in this project. This is followed by a discussion of the research procedure, including difficulties relating to recruitment, a statistical overview of the sample of women recruited for this project, and an outline of the structure of the interviews used to collect data. The chapter concludes with an overview of the procedure used to analyse this data. Throughout this chapter the aim is to also give the reader an insight into some of the difficulties and challenges encountered during this research project, as a way of highlighting not only the pitfalls a novice researcher may face, but also ways in which some of these challenges have been resolved.

2.2 Methodological Approach

While the latter half of this decade has seen an increasing focus on situated, 'location-specific' research into the social implications of new media use (Baym et al., 2007; Boase, 2008; Tracey Kennedy, Smith, Wells, & Wellman, 2008; Wilding, 2006), there remains an underdeveloped understanding of how the use of new media is *experienced* by individuals from different social and demographic groups. Indeed, as was noted in a large quantitative study of American college students, the research community remains "a long way from either broad or fully refined understandings of how mediation affects interpersonal relationships, or how specific features of relationships may have an impact on the use of particular communication modalities" (Baym et al., 2007, p. 748). Thus, while quantitative studies investigating ICT use can indicate *which* communication technologies people are using to connect with *whom*, they cannot reveal the complex web of factors which underpin individuals' communication practices and choices, or the social significance of communication technologies in sustaining personal relationships. This research project, developed specifically in response to calls such as this, has therefore adopted a qualitative, interpretative framework to investigate the phenomenon of midlife women's ICT use. In contrast to quantitative studies which are concerned with reproducibility and generalisability, qualitative research is generally considered to be the most appropriate for exploring the diversity of human experience (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 19). Indeed, according to Polkinghorne, the "experiential life of people is the area qualitative methods are *designed* [italics added] to study" (p. 138). Qualitative researchers strive for rich, thick data (Green, 1999, p. 45) in order to develop an in-depth analysis of individual experiences and social processes. Denzin and Lincoln sum up the commonly perceived differences between researchers working within these seemingly diametrically opposed paradigms, suggesting that qualitative researchers "seek answers to questions that stress *how* [italics added] social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes" (2000, p. 8).

In practice, the division between qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches is no longer as distinct as it may have been in the past. Certainly there is much in the literature documenting the tensions between the quantitative approach, which has historically been constructed as promoting an objective, value-free, 'hard' form of research, and the qualitative approach, which has been criticised as delivering subjective, speculative, 'soft' analysis (Green, 1991, p. 84; Silverman, 1997, p. 13). Underpinning these critiques of qualitative and quantitative approaches have been epistemological debates on the nature of 'truth' and 'reality', with sharp distinctions drawn between objectivist traditions, which are predicated on the notion that "'out there' [is] an objective social reality" waiting to be observed through objective observation (Green, p. 86), and constructionist

traditions, which reflect poststructural and/or postmodern constructions of 'truth' as emerging from multiple realities and perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 9).

To a large extent, the debate over the relative merits of these research paradigms has moved on in recent years (Silverman, 1997, p. 14). Rather than philosophical engagement with the nature of reality and scientific 'truth', contemporary researchers are more likely to be concerned with matching research objectives with appropriate methodological approaches (Silverman, 1997, p. 14). That is, the primacy of the research objective/s requires the novice researcher to consider which approach is most likely to allow them to meet the objectives or purpose of the research. For Crotty, "every piece of research is unique and calls for a unique methodology" (1998, pp. 13-14). Given that this research is focused primarily on the processes by which midlife women appropriate communication technologies, and the social significance of that appropriation in the context of relationships and transitional challenges, it is therefore necessary to choose epistemological and methodological approaches that not only acknowledge the diversity of human experience, but which also encourage a research perspective most likely to lead to the discovery and expression of multiple voices and experiences. Accordingly, I have determined that constructionism[2], with its focus on the generation of meaning through the interaction of humans with the physical and social environments in which they exist (Crotty, 1998, p. 44), offers the most useful epistemological framework through which to consider how women engage with communication technologies. Moreover, the value of a constructionist stance rests on the attention paid to the "meaning-making activities themselves ... simply because it is the meaning-making/sense-making/attributional activities that shape action (or inaction)" (Guba & Lincoln, 2008, p. 167). This is particularly relevant to inquiries into the appropriation of communication technologies, as Umble's study of the Amish community's use of the telephone revealed

> Historical and cultural orientations shape the meaning of the telephone for particular social groups. The telephone has little universal meaning apart from that which is constructed or negotiated by those social groups who make use of it. Its meaning is transformed as social and cultural boundaries are crossed. (Umble, 1992, p. 183)

While a constructionist stance draws the researcher's attention to the process of meaning-making, an interpretive[3] perspective requires the researcher to grasp the meanings generated through

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[2] The use of the term 'constructionism' in preference to 'constructivism' follows Michael Crotty's application of the latter to refer to "epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on 'the meaning-making activity of the individual mind'", whereas the former term focuses on "'the collective generation (and transmission) of meaning'" (1998, p. 58).

[3] There appears to be some ambiguity in the literature concerning definitions of *epistemological stances* and *theoretical perspectives*. In Schwandt's discussion, interpretivism and social constructionism sit together under the banner of epistemologies (2000), whereas Crotty has developed a model for social research comprised of four elements which inform each other. According to Crotty's model, theoretical perspectives such as positivism, interpretivism and feminism, which illuminate a particular world view, embody a particular epistemological stance, which incorporates "a certain understanding of what is entailed in knowing" (1998, p.

those processes, and interpret them for the reader/s. As Schwandt notes, "to find meaning in action, or to say one understands what a particular action means, requires that one interpret in a particular way what the actors are doing" (2000, p. 191). Typical interpretive studies weave interviewees' words with researchers' 'translation' of stories and observations. In describing how these elements work together, Strauss and Corbin suggest that the "illustrative materials are meant to give a sense of what the observed world is really like, while the researcher's interpretations are meant to represent a more detached conceptualization of that reality" (1990, p. 22). A slightly more critical perspective is put forward by Berger, who contends that "ethnography is always a depiction of the ethnographer's experience of a particular people as encountered in fieldwork" (2001, p. 507). Such a statement implies that as a consequence of this interpretative act, "readers are thus always dependent on the second-hand account of the ethnographer" (Hine, 2000, p. 46). Gray extends this perspective even further, in her comments on the nature of the data she used to develop her ethnographic account of women's experiences with video cassette recorders (VCRs):

> What the women said to me does not directly reflect their experience, but it is their way of articulating that experience. The interview data upon which this project is based has therefore been subjected to a double interpretation: the first is the interpretation which the women bring to their experience, and the one they share with me, whilst the second is the interpretation I make of what they say. Their interpretations depend on their subject position and the discourses to which they have access and through which their subjectivities are constructed. My interpretation depends on these things also, with the important addition of a theoretical and conceptual discourse, which constitutes the framework of my analysis. (Gray, 1992, pp. 33-34)

Central to the practice of interpretivism is the importance of understanding, as opposed to explanation (Schwandt, 2000, p. 191). In Schwandt's discussion on the nature of interpretivism, he highlights different definitions of interpretive understanding, including empathic identification, which posits that a researcher should aim to "transcend or break out of her or his historical circumstances in order to reproduce the meaning or intention of the actor" (2000, p. 192). Underpinning such definitions is the notion that the "interpreter remains unaffected by and external to the interpretive process" (Schwandt, p. 194). In contrast to these traditional definitions of interpretive understanding, this research project adopts a notion of the process of understanding as something that cannot avoid taking place within the context of a researcher's culturally and socially acquired prejudices and beliefs. Rather than being able to step outside such prejudices and preconceptions, the theory of philosophical hermeneutics constructs the development of understanding through interpretation as occurring alongside an ability to "examine our historically inherited and unreflectively held prejudices and alter those that disable our efforts to understand others, and ourselves" (Garrison, cited in Schwandt, 2000, p. 195). Thus, as Schwandt notes, "meaning is negotiated mutually in the act of

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8). In this research I have chosen to follow Crotty's model, and thus have adopted the theoretical perspective of interpretivism, which in turn is informed by the epistemology embedded in constructionism.

interpretation; it is not simply discovered" (2000, p. 195). This aspect of interpretivism fits well within an overarching qualitative, constructionist framework which aims to develop a shared understanding of the meaning of communication technologies in women's lives in the first decade of the Twenty First century.

2.3 Research Methodology

2.3.1 Ethnography

Given that this research project has adopted an interpretivist perspective, with the central aim of understanding the meanings of communication technologies in women's lives (as opposed to providing an explanation or description), it therefore follows that the methodology chosen should offer the best opportunities for me to develop such understandings. Ethnography, with its focus on studying and interpreting culture (Chambers, 2000, p. 852; Geertz, 1973, p. 15; Spradley, 1979, p. 3), has been chosen as the main methodological approach. As Spradley indicates, the "essential core of ethnography is ... [the] concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand" (1979, p. 5); as such this approach complements the overarching constructionist, interpretative perspective taken in this research project. In defining ethnography as a research *methodology*, I again follow Crotty's framework, which positions a methodology as a "strategy or plan of action", which "shapes our choice and use of particular methods and links them to the desired outcomes" (1998, p. 7).

As with many areas of academic inquiry, ethnographic research continues to be contested territory (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001, pp. 2-4; Chambers, 2000, p. 851). Emerging from the discipline of anthropology (Gobo, 2008, p. 7), traditional notions of ethnographic research emphasised protracted periods of fieldwork, which required the researcher to live for months or years at a time in the culture they were studying (Green, 2003, pp. 133-134). Only by 'going native' could a researcher authentically "grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world" (Malinowski, 1978, p. 25). Contemporary ethnography now encompasses a more diverse set of practices and settings, and is more likely to be concerned with understanding "cultural systems" within organisations and institutions, or within subsets of the population, such as homeless men, diasporic communities, prisoners or elderly women (Spradley, 1979, p. 12), and more recently online communities (Costello, 2009; Hine, 2000). Alongside diversity in subject matter has been the emergence of multiple 'ethnographic' methods. For Gobo, the term ethnography has come to represent such a diverse range of methodologies and methods that "everything is now ethnography: from life stories to the analysis of letters and questionnaires, from autobiography to narrative analysis, from action research to performance, from field research lasting a few days to that lasting several years" (p. 15). Such applications of the term have, according to Gobo, served to obscure the original

meaning and intent of this methodological approach (2008, p. 16). Nevertheless, a review of the literature suggests contemporary ethnography encompasses a relatively common set of practices, some of which continue to reflect traditions inherited from anthropology. For researchers such as Heyl, ethnographic research necessarily involves a protracted period of interviewing, which facilitates the development of a genuine connection between the interviewer and interviewee (Heyl, 2001, p. 369). Similarly, Skeggs's discussion on feminist ethnography emphasises the temporal aspect of ethnographic research:

> fieldwork that will be conducted over a *prolonged period of time*; utilizing different research techniques; conducted *within the settings* of the participants, with an understanding of how the context informs the action; *involving the researcher in participation* and observation; involving an account of the development of relationships between the researcher and the researched and focusing on how experience and practice are part of wider processes. (Skeggs, 2001, p. 426)

An essential characteristic of ethnographic research is still considered to be immersed participation in the 'culture' to be studied (Bloor, 2001, p. 177; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 1; White, Drew, & Hay, 2009, p. 22). Underpinning this requirement for immersion is the importance of observation as a more accurate source of information than attitudes (Gobo, 2008, p. 5). As Gobo implies, observation is a superior (and more objective) form of studying culture "because what ethnography mainly observes is behaviour (rituals, routines and ceremonials), and these are much more stable over time than are attitudes and opinions (the privileged fields of enquiry for discursive interviews and surveys)" (2008, p. 328). However, while Gobo constructs observation as a more reliable research approach, for other researchers participation is also a critical aspect of ethnography: "The researcher does not just observe at close quarters, but interacts with the researched to ask questions and gain the insights into life that come from doing as well as seeing" (Hine, 2000, p. 47). Moreover, when the aim is to understand meanings of identity and subjectivity constructed through shared cultural and social practices, then, as Gray notes, "arguably, this requires periods of intense investigation into meaning production, rather than extended periods of observation" (2003, p. 17). As noted previously, given that the overarching aim of this research project is to understand the social significance of communication technologies in midlife women's lives, I feel that participation and interaction to be as important, if not more so, than observation. Moreover, while the prime subject of observation is behaviour (Gobo, p. 328), such an approach has limited application when the main goal is to develop an understanding of the motivations and social context framing such behaviour. As White, Drew and Hay contend, definitions of ethnography which construct prolonged periods of observation as central to the methodology may in some circumstances underplay the significance of other aspects of ethnographic research:

> The quality of observation that is represented in the writing of 'cases' is a critical issue, at least as important as quantity or duration of observation. This in turn, depends, not

only on 'data' (visual or otherwise), but also the process of interview and the act of writing that proceeds from interview. (White et al., 2009, p. 22)

In contrast to these relatively 'pure' constructions of ethnography are more inclusive definitions, such as that offered by Willis, who describes ethnography as

an umbrella term for fieldwork, interviewing, and other means of gathering data in authentic (e.g., real-world) environments … [that] puts the researcher in the settings that he or she wants to study. The research is conducted in the natural environment rather than in an artificially contrived setting. (Willis, 2007, p. 237)

From this perspective, it is evident that this project meets the criteria to be considered ethnographic research. As the following sections explore in more detail, this project was conducted in 'real-world' environments, within settings familiar to the participants, and involved both participation and observation. Many of the individual interviews extended across several hours, which enabled a good level of rapport and empathy to develop between myself and the participants. In addition, while not meeting traditional notions of 'prolonged observation', extended contact has occurred with a number of participants through ongoing conversations conducted via email and telephone calls. In some cases, this prolonged contact has extended across almost the entire life of the project, and has helped me to develop deeper insights and a greater understanding of the meanings of communication technologies in midlife women's lives.

It should also be noted that as a midlife woman myself, I am very much a *participant*/observer within the 'culture' I have been studying. At the time the research project began, I was personally experiencing three of the four key transitions identified as characteristic of the midlife period in women's lives. Such personal experiences acted as a 'bridge' during interviews, facilitating the development of rapport through the sharing of common experiences. Perceived as a midlife woman first, and an academic researcher second, many of the women appeared comfortable in talking openly to me about their experiences, whether they were accompanied by humorous anecdotes such as ripping off jumpers and scarves and frantically fanning in response to menopausal hot flushes, or involved the discussion of serious and much more personal issues such as the difficulties in raising teenage children, or coping with midlife relationship problems. There were situations in which genuine empathy and understanding framed the conversations, as in several interviews in which together we shared the profound sense of loss experienced as a result of the physical/mental deterioration and/or death of a much-loved parent. In a sign of the degree to which my life mirrored the thesis' subject matter, during one of the interviews I received word that my elderly father had been rushed in for emergency surgery. Writing some two years after this event, the kindness and concern expressed by the participant, Erin, is still remembered with great clarity, and appreciated beyond words. It is debatable whether the same degree of openness and empathy would have been established had I followed traditional rules for interviewing, which dictate that the interviewer approaches the interview from a 'hands-off' perspective, and represses any "revelation of personal feelings and

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emotions" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 710). Past advice to researchers on how to respond to interviewees' questions included the following: "When asked what you mean and think, tell them you are here to learn, not to pass judgement, that the situation is very complex" (Galtung, cited in Oakley, 1981, p. 35). Other times researchers were advised to adopt an interview style akin to a psychoanalyst, and remain as non-directive as possible (Oakley, p. 37). Fontana and Frey sum up this approach by suggesting "the interviewer is not to give his or own opinions and is to evade direct questions. What seems to be a conversation is really a one-way pseudoconversation" (p. 710).

Certainly in the early stages of this project I did aim to minimise my participation in individual interviews, although not for the purpose of repressing personal emotions. Rather, it was out of a desire to limit the degree to which my comments might influence interviewees' responses, and/or take up time I felt would be better left free for the interviewee's voice. However, it quickly became evident that in terms of developing a comfortable communication space, this strategy was neither productive nor practical. In some instances such 'unnatural' communication techniques ran counter to the development of rapport between me and the woman I was interviewing. Moreover, the issue of my role as a *participant* in the culture being investigated, that is, as someone who is herself experiencing the phenomenon under investigation (Oakley, 1981, p. 57), means that contrived attempts to diverge from the normal communicative practices of that culture could potentially be met with, at best, a certain level of scepticism, and at worst, distrust and a lack of cooperation from the interviewees. This is particularly relevant in the context of woman-to-woman interviews. As Jennifer Coates' research on women's talk reveals, reciprocity, mutual self-disclosure and exchange are central to women's conversations (1996, p. 61). Indeed, Coates' study indicates that one of the key characteristics of women's conversations is the "mirroring exchange of personal experience", a feature not evident in women's conversations with men (p. 61). As Coates notes, "we confide in each other, tell each other our hopes and fears, reveal moments in our lives when we have behaved 'badly'" (p. 165). Of critical significance to this dynamic of reciprocity is the fact that "the vulnerability arising from self-disclosure can be contained safely" (Coates, p. 89). Thus, in striving to minimise my participation, and as a consequence the degree to which *I* was prepared to self-disclose, whilst simultaneously encouraging my respondents to freely self-disclose, I was disrupting the conventions of women's talk, and creating unnecessary barriers to the development of a comfortable and *safe* conversational space. As a result, I quickly found, just as Ann Oakley had discovered over 20 years earlier, that resisting offering "personal feedback was not helpful in terms of the traditional goal of promoting 'rapport'" (1981, p. 49). Indeed, I now believe that building rapport and trust through my willingness to self-disclose intimate thoughts and experiences with the participants has been a critical factor in the degree to which they in turn have been prepared to share their stories. Such a perspective supports Oakley's argument that there can be "no intimacy without reciprocity" (p. 49).

However, it is also necessary to qualify this discussion on building rapport; the level of ease exhibited in the interviews, and the degree to which the women were willing to share intimate details of their lives with me, should not be read as indicative of any particular interviewing skills. Rather, as Finch notes in her discussion on the ethics and politics of interviewing women, the success of woman-to-woman interviewing largely rests upon a particular identification that develops between interviewer and interviewee, stemming from a shared "subordinate structural position by virtue of their gender" (Finch, 1984, p. 76). Thus for Finch

> the ease with which one can get women to talk in the interview situation depends not so much upon one's skills as an interviewer, nor upon one's expertise as a sociologist, but upon one's identity as a woman....[this] is ... central to the special character of the woman-to-woman interview. (Finch, 1984, p. 78)

2.3.2 *Feminist perspectives*

While my initial approach to interviewing was subsequently found to be unhelpful, it was not underpinned by notions of the interviewees as little more than objects through which to source useful data (Oakley, 1981, p. 33). Such an interview style is now commonly considered to be ethically dubious, in that interviewees are positioned as "data-producing machine[s]" (Oakley, p. 37)[4]. Rather, as discussed in the previous paragraph, the initial approach reflected my aim of promoting interviewees' voices, rather than my own. Although not overtly conscious of the implications of this at the time, on reflection the desire to highlight women's experiences with communication technologies suggests that elements of a feminist paradigm have influenced the nature of the research undertaken. Certainly the goal of allowing women to express the meanings *they* ascribe to their use of

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[4] Following Oakley's research, other feminist researchers (Finch, 1984; Stacey, 1988) have questioned whether the notion of reciprocity embedded in feminist approaches to interviewing necessarily eliminates elements of manipulation and power inequalities. As Finch points out, the ease with which women open up to female interviewers leaves interviewees "vulnerable as subjects of research" (1984, p. 81). On a related noted, Stacey cautions that ethnographic methods in themselves create greater risks for research participants than do more "abstract" methods (1988, p. 24). For Stacey, "[t]he greater the intimacy, the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship, the greater is the danger" (p. 24). During the interviews, I was certainly aware that in opening themselves up to me, the research participants were trusting me to handle the information they were sharing in a professional and confidential manner. In recognising this responsibility, I have taken a number of steps to ensure that I adhere to high ethical standards throughout this research project. Firstly, I have removed all identifying information from the transcripts and this thesis, so as to avoid any potential for the interviewees to be identified by anyone reading the thesis. I have also made every effort to ensure that I have interpreted the interviewees' comments as accurately as possible, and resisted embellishing comments or using their words out of context. In addition, a number of interviews were punctuated by women asking me to turn the digital recorder off as they did not wish parts of their conversation to be recorded. Most often at these times the women elaborated on very intimate or intensely personal issues. None of this 'off the record' material has been included in this thesis, although it has helped to shape my understanding of the factors which influence women's behaviour. Lastly, I also opted to leave out one of the interviews (I actually did 41 interviews for this research) with a woman who was going through a very difficult period in her life. During her interview a great deal of very emotional content was discussed, but after some thought I decided that using this material in my thesis would unfairly exploit this woman at a time in her life when she was very emotionally vulnerable. In hindsight, I believe I made the right decision to omit this interview from the thesis.

communication technologies reflects aspects of feminist practice (Gobo, 2008, p. 58). In describing her own motivations for departing from traditional interviewing techniques, Oakley explains

> I regarded sociological research as an essential way of giving the subjective situation of women greater visibility not only in sociology, but, more importantly, in society, than it has traditionally had. Interviewing women was, then, a strategy for documenting women's own accounts of their lives. (Oakley, 1981, p. 48)

Likewise, this research has aimed to make visible the experiences of an often over-looked group of ICT consumers. As noted elsewhere in this project, while there has been a great deal of attention paid to young people's use of ICTs (Haddon, 2004, pp. 31-53; Ling, 2007), and the degree to which new media spaces such as social networking sites have become embedded in young people's social practices (d. boyd, 2008; Holland & Harpin, 2008; Lenhart et al., 2005), there has been very little research into how new communication technologies have been appropriated by midlife women. Therefore, the deliberate focus on women in this research project might be seen to reflect elements of feminist methodological approaches, as expressed by Olesen: "Feminist research in sociology and anthropology analyzes both women's representations of experience and the material, social, economic, or gendered conditions that articulate the experience" (2008, p. 329). Certainly, when considered against Olesen's definition, or a list of "guiding principles' which Gobo argues differentiate feminist ethnographies from main[male]stream ethnographies, this project appears to meet the criteria of feminist research. These criteria include attention to processes; listening to participants; "access[ing] the experience of participants, grasping the more subjective, emotional and irrational aspects of their lives"; "pay[ing] closer attention to reflexivity"; adopting research ethics based on reciprocity and respect; and "put[ting] the observed and the observer on the same footing so that the power relation usually exploited by the latter is reduced" (Gobo, 2008, p. 58).

However, Gobo's typology also limits feminist research to that which has "a political impact ... it must aid understanding of how and why women are oppressed and the solutions that are possible" (2008, p. 58), a position echoed by Skeggs' assertion that "all feminist research is related to wider political positions" (2001, p. 430). This implies an overarching goal to address oppression and inequalities stemming from women's social position (Gobo, p. 57). Such a qualifier would appear to prevent this research from being classified as feminist, since its goals are not political in nature. And yet, as Crotty draws attention to, defining feminist research through the process of categorisation has itself been criticised as conforming to masculine processes of demarcation (Crotty, 1998, p. 163). Given the difficulties in determining whether this research project 'fits' a classic feminist methodology, it is perhaps more useful to draw attention to the feminist values and orientation which have informed this research, albeit at times unconsciously. Thus, a commitment to exploring women's experiences through their own voices, through the channel of in-depth qualitative interviews; a recognition that those experiences are in turn a reflection of the social, economic and gendered contexts of women's lives; and a reflexive approach to the processes of interviewing and

interpretation indicate that this ethnographic research has been strongly influenced by feminist perspectives.

2.3.3 *The influence of grounded theory perspectives*

Lastly, while this research project meets an inclusive definition of ethnography, it also reflects the grounded nature of some ethnographic research, as discussed by Garson (2008, para. Key concepts and terms) and Green (2003, p. 136). Grounded theory, as elaborated by Strauss and Corbin, is theory that is

> inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23)

As this statement suggests, practitioners of grounded theory approach the phenomenon to be studied methodically, drawing on a "systematic set of procedures" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). In the context of this research project, it is something of an overstatement to suggest that a conscious decision was made to inform the ethnographic approach with elements of grounded theory. In reality, it was more due to recruitment difficulties, as outlined in detail in the following section, that I engaged so deeply with the data at such an early stage in the data collection process. But having done so, opportunities arose to question preconceptions that had influenced the research questions and interview approach. This resulted in changes to the sampling approach, as well as a redefinition of the focus of data collection and analysis. Two examples illustrate these processes. Firstly, a preliminary literature review had identified the 'empty nest' as one of the key transitions women negotiate during their midlife years. However, during the early stage of interviewing it became clear that as a result of a complex mix of social and economic factors, many women have either delayed parenting until their 30s or early 40s, resulting in them continuing to have dependent children well into their 50s, or conversely, many young adult children are delaying moving out of the family home. In either event, the result is that the classic 'empty nest' stage for their mothers has been pushed back a number of years. Difficulties in recruiting women who met the 'empty nest' criteria largely reflected these social changes, and demanded a reframing of the sampling approach. As mentioned, this is discussed in more detail in the next section.

The second example aligns more closely with the rationale for grounded theory, in that rather than strive to match respondent's responses to pre-assigned theories, researchers should seek to "induce theory from the perspectives of members of the culture and from observation....[and] seek validation of induced theories by going back to members of the culture for their reaction" (Garson, 2008, para. Key concepts and terms). Initially, interview questions were designed to encourage participants to consider how they used the Internet to connect with family and friends, within the

context of relationship maintenance and access to social support. Consequently, questions focused on how the women used the Internet for communication (as opposed to searching for specific information, or for online banking etc.), including canvassing the nature of their email use and whether they used other online technologies, such as Skype and webcams to connect with their social network. However, both during the interviews, and subsequent transcription and preliminary analysis, it became apparent that structuring the interviews in this way was obscuring the real significance of new communication channels such as email. While asking women to identify who they email, and how frequently, may help to describe the extent of their use, it fails to situate the women's use of email within the broader context of their social networks and personal circumstances. That is, in narrowing the research focus to the women's use of email, Skype, social networking sites and the like, the interviews ran the very real risk of sidelining the focus on communication technologies as critical conduits through which *relationships* are enacted and sustained. Nor did this narrow approach help to explicate the decision-making processes underpinning women's communication choices. In order to understand more clearly why an individual might choose to use email for some purposes but not others, a social rather than technological lens needed to be applied.

As the following excerpt from one of the earliest interviews demonstrates, embedded in 47 year old Gina's response to a question on the role of email in the exchange of social support are deeper insights into the relationship between email and other communication channels, as well as reflections on the subjective aspects of 'support' in this woman's life:

> It's a bit like when I had my operation. I'd never had a general anaesthetic before and I was actually very nervous about it, but when I sent that email to my girlfriend and said, "Look, you know, I'm going in for this op on the second, and dah dah dah", but I didn't sort of convey to her how worried I was about... I wasn't worried about the operation itself, I was just worried about how I was going to react to the general [anaesthetic], 'cause I've seen people that have been paralysed ... I was really quite panicking, but I didn't put that in the email. I just said, "Going in, everything should be fine, it's just your basic [medical term]", whereas my girlfriend who just lives down the road, I actually went and saw her and said, "I'm actually scared shitless"....Because my girlfriends were so far away, there's nothing they could have done.

> *The girlfriend in [country]?*

> Both of them. So I just said, "Going in for this op, you know, dah dah dah" ... but it was a girlfriend down the road who I knew had been through multiple operations that I went and really said, "Aargh!" Because she was immediate, she was there, she could see how I was looking. An email is good, but it's not ... it's good, but sometimes you just need someone to hold your hand, and say, "There there, you'll be [al]right."

> And also in the email I didn't want to scare my other girlfriends, because there was nothing they could have done. It's like writing a letter... you judge what you can and can't do....you don't tend to want to send people doom and gloom in emails. It's all, "Oh, we've done this, we've gone here"; the emails tend to be a bit light and airy, not quite so [intense]. There's some emotion, but it's definitely not... and I think part of that is the sheer geographical location; you can't be there for someone to cry on or

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whatever. You know, you can offer support as in, you know, "If you want to come and visit there is a place for you", or, "If I'm coming down, can I come and stay?" In that respect, it is support, but it's a selected support. (Gina)

Consequently, having recognised, through transcription and analysis of early interviews, that the research was metaphorically 'missing the forest for the trees', I shifted the focus of subsequent interviews[5] from examining how the *technologies* are used, to considering how particular *relationships* are maintained and support enacted *through* communication technologies. In this respect, concepts which emerged during initial data analysis subsequently shaped and were verified during ongoing data collection and analysis, in a process that mirrors aspects of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). This process also suggests a degree of "theoretical sensitivity" common to grounded theory approaches (Strauss & Corbin, pp. 41-42). According to Strauss and Corbin , "theoretical sensitivity refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't" (p. 42).

It is evident, therefore, that elements of both feminist and grounded theory perspectives have informed the ethnographic methodology used to investigate the phenomenon of women's use of new communication technologies during their midlife years. Such a 'hybrid' approach, far from diluting the degree of methodological rigour applied to this project, has instead served to produce deeper insights and more nuanced understandings of the social significance of new communication technologies in women's lives during their transitional midlife years. The following sections consider the specific methods used to collect and analyse the data in this project.

2.4   Research Procedure

2.4.1 Recruitment

In-depth, one-on-one qualitative interviews were conducted with 40 women aged between 45 and 55 years of age. The initial goal of the project was to recruit 40 participants; approximately half of whom fitted the definition of 'empty nesters', and the remaining half of whom, through a recent marital separation or divorce, could be described as 'empty bedders'. It was expected that some latitude would be needed in identifying appropriate participants, as it was recognised that a significant proportion of suitable participants may well present as both 'empty nesters' and 'empty bedders'. In addition, the women were required to have home access to the Internet, and to use it for personal use (as opposed to using it solely for work or household duties, such as paying bills online).

In the early stages of the project participants were recruited using a process of 'snowball sampling', as well as drawing on personal contacts. Snowball sampling is defined by Bailey as

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[5] Interview questions are included in Appendices 4a and 4b.

a nonprobabalistic sampling technique [in which] a few persons having the requisite characteristics are identified and interviewed. These persons are used as informants to identify others who qualify for inclusion in the sample....The term "snowball" stems from the analogy of a snowball, which begins small but becomes bigger and bigger as it rolls downhill. (Bailey, 1982, pp. 99-100)

In this context, snowball sampling provides a mechanism through which to recruit appropriate research participants from outside the researcher's social networks, and can also be a useful way to recruit participants for sensitive topics (Penrod, Preston, Cain, & Starks, 2003, p. 101). One criticism often levelled at snowball sampling is that the strategy can result in the recruitment of a sample of people who share similar cultural, ethnic or demographic backgrounds. The implication is that a homogenous sample can limit the possibility of making generalisations from the research findings (Penrod et al., p. 102). In part, this criticism may relate to the use of the term 'sampling', which "carries the connotation that those chosen are a sample of a population and the purpose of their selection is to enable findings to be applied to a population" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 139). However, as Polkinghorne makes clear,

> participants and documents for a qualitative study are not selected because they fulfil the representative requirements of statistical inference but because they can provide substantial contributions to filling out the structure and character of the experience under investigation. (2005, p. 139)

This notion of qualitative research as focusing on the specific, as opposed to describing any universal experience, makes it an appropriate methodological 'fit' with the broader aims of this research project. As noted in Chapter One, the germ of this research project developed in response to my growing awareness that many of the experiences of Internet use described in the academic literature did not correspond to either my own experiences, or those of my students. Themes evident in the early research on Internet use relied upon the attributes of this new technology in order to predict future social trends (D. Miller et al., 2004, p. 76; Woolgar, 2002, p. 4). This focus on the technology as the prime driver of social change tends to underplay the role social context plays in influencing Internet consumption (D. Miller et al., p. 81). Moreover, claims that the Internet is fundamentally changing people's behaviour "presume and promote a uniformity of opinion and effect" that ignores the diversity of human experience (Woolgar, p. 6). To counter these generalisations, researchers such as Woolgar (2002) and Miller, Slater and Suchman (2004) have called for a more critical 'bottoms-up' approach to Internet research. Indeed, Miller et al. suggest that a focus on the study of Internet adoption and incorporation situated in one specific 'place' "is very far from being a limitation....it is ... the only firm basis for building up the bigger generalizations and abstractions: quite simply, one can use this particularism as a solid grounding for *comparative* ethnography" (p. 79). Likewise, Gray, drawing on Johnson, contends that "small-scale, modest studies, focusing as they do on cultures of subordination, practices of everyday life, etc. can 'reorder a taken for granted landscape'" (Gray, 2003, p. 74).

Thus the illegitimacy of generalising from qualitative research findings should not be viewed as a limitation or weakness of either the research methodology or findings. Moreover, in the context of this specific research project, a concern with the representativeness of the sample, or the generalisability of the sample, seems to run counter to the broader research goal of providing an in-depth analysis of Internet consumption by a particular group of people in a particular social context at a particular time in their lives, as called for by Miller, Slater and Suchman (2004, p. 79). For Polkinghorne, the focus of qualitative studies "is about experience itself, not about its distribution in a population" (2005, p. 139). Thus, to extend Polkinghorne's argument, it is the *experiences* of a *particular* group of women who are likely to be living through similar lifecycle transitions which is the "unit of analysis" (Polkinghorne, p. 139) in this research project, rather than the degree to which those experiences are replicated in the wider community. From this perspective, snowball sampling can be considered a legitimate means by which to recruit suitable participants.

The recruitment strategy adopted in this research project reflects a purposive sampling approach. Purposive or purposeful sampling describes a recruitment strategy which aims, from the outset, to recruit a particular type of participant; one who is most likely to help provide "refinement and clarity to understanding an experience" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 140). A justification for the use of purposeful or purposive sampling in qualitative research is provided by Merriam:

> To begin with, since you are not interested in 'how much' or 'how often,' random sampling makes little sense. Instead, since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which most can be learned. This is called a purposive or purposeful sample. (Merriam, cited in Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 140)

Similarly, Gray suggests that in "small-scale projects", such as those undertaken by postgraduate researchers such as myself, "the core of respondents should be identified in relation to their capacity to provide as rich a set of data as can be managed" (2003, p. 101). Given the initial aim of this research was to explore how women are using the Internet to manage relationships and access social support to help them negotiate midlife transitions, I believed it to be essential that the selection process focused on those women most likely to be experiencing two or more midlife transitional events. That is, if an enriched understanding is to emerge of how the Internet is being used to help women manage the challenges of midlife, then the research design needed to enable selection of what Polkinghorne terms "fertile exemplars of the experience" (2005, p. 140). Thus the first element of the selection strategy focused on recruiting women who could offer insights into how midlife transitions are experienced. Secondly, given that the central aim of the research project is to examine how the Internet is used by women during this transitional period in their lives, it was also necessary to limit participants to those who used the Internet for personal purposes. In leaving this second recruitment criteria as open as possible, the hope was to provide a more nuanced account of the degree to which women have adopted the Internet in to their everyday communication practices.

However, while snowball sampling has been shown to be an effective method for recruiting participants in other research projects, it was not particularly successful for this project. Invariably, when the participants were asked if they knew anyone who might meet the research criteria, their typical response would be: "Oh, there's Susan, she might be good – oh, no, she's still got kids at home." This became a common refrain; the difficulty with recruiting women through participants' social networks effectively stalled the interviewing schedule after 15 women had been recruited through snowball sampling, and another 9 had been recruited from my own work and social networks.

It should also be noted that in a few instances there also appeared to be a certain reticence on the part of the women to recommend their friends or acquaintances. There are perhaps several reasons for this. It may be that while I felt the interview process was relaxed and non-threatening, this was a perception not shared by the participants. Alternatively, given the personal nature of some of the interview questions, particularly those relating to networks of support and women's friendships, it may have been that some women felt uncomfortable about what their friends might say in relation to their friendship. There is also the possibility that while the participants were happy to take part in the interviews, they did not feel comfortable 'dobbing' in a friend.

When snowball sampling didn't achieve the desired results, other strategies were employed to help recruit participants. Emails were sent to a range of women's organisations, such as 'Red Hat Society' groups, local women's service groups, a cross-cultural women's organisation, and through Winfo Alert, an email distribution list sponsored by the Office for Women's Policy, Department for Communities, which has almost 500 members. In addition, I contacted a local ABC radio station, and was able to promote my research through an on-air interview. The results from this expanded recruitment strategy were, unfortunately, less than spectacular. The radio interview resulted in three responses – two from women who were subsequently interviewed, and one from a woman who ran a women's business network and wanted to 'cross-promote'. While this contact initially appeared promising, follow-up telephone calls failed to secure further participants. Winfo Alert drew two responses, both of which resulted in successful interviews, while emails to the Red Hat Society (RHS) groups produced another two interviews. In addition, the leader of a local RHS group included the research Information Letter[6] on their online newsletter; unfortunately this failed to elicit any responses. In contrast to 'dead-ends' such as this, in an example of serendipity, a participant was recruited while I was in the process of interviewing another participant in a busy coffee shop.

While the recruitment period is long past, memories of frustration and disheartenment linger. In reviewing their own research experiences, Thomas, Bloor and Frankland note that "recruitment can be a time-consuming, frustrating and indeed thankless task that requires considerable effort and

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[6] See Appendix 2 for a copy of the Information Letter sent to participants.

resilience on the part of the researcher" (2007, p. 441). A continuing lack of success in recruiting sufficient participants, or having to deal with continual refusals, can tempt researchers to "bend the rules" and accept participants who don't meet the research criteria (Thomas et al., p. 441). Such a possibility was certainly an issue in this research project, and the common response from women that they knew someone who would be 'perfect' for the research, but for the fact that they were outside the research criteria, meant that it was tempting to 'fudge' the demographic data in order to reach the required number of participants. However, given that one of the research objectives was to identify ways in which women use communication technologies to draw on their networks of social support to help them manage transitions during their midlife years, it was felt that to expand the age range, perhaps in order to pick up a slightly older cohort of women whose children were more likely to have left home, would draw attention away from the focus on other midlife transitions, such as menopause and the ageing and death of parents.

This impasse required a reappraisal of the rationale behind the research criteria and method of recruitment. What could be made of the difficulties being encountered? Perhaps, as mentioned previously, the nature of the request for contacts during interviews or through the Information Letter was in some way discouraging women to recommend other potential participants. Possibly recruitment emails distributed through multiple channels were not being distributed beyond the person to whom it was initially sent. Some women who might meet the criteria apparently didn't have the time or inclination to respond. Alternatively it might be that the research criteria was not reflective of contemporary women's typical midlife experiences. While it's possible that elements of all these contributed in some way to the difficulties in recruitment, the most likely factor impinging on successful recruitment appeared to be a flawed assumption about the nature of contemporary midlife women's lives. In developing the proposal for this research, it became clear that 'midlife', as a stage of life, can be defined by particular life-changing events (Lachman & James, 1997, p. 1) that may present both physiological and psychological challenges to women. These 'events' were identified through a preliminary literature review, which revealed four common transitions in midlife women's lives. These can be condensed to three if the transitional events of the 'empty nest' and the 'empty bed' are defined broadly as constituting role changes. Thus the transitions identified, which are considered in detail in Chapter Three, are menopause; role changes due to children growing up and moving out of home, and/or relationship breakdown; and the ageing and death of parents. The initial criteria for the target group were developed in response to the findings of this preliminary literature review: the aim was to recruit women who were most likely to be experiencing a combination of these transitional events. In narrowing the target group down to women aged 45 to 55, it was surmised that, by default, many of the women would most likely be experiencing 2 of the 4 transitional experiences identified as characteristic of the midlife period; menopause (M. Smith & Michalka, 2006, p. 3), and the ageing and death of one or both parents (Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 184). Thus, it was

felt that focusing the final sample of 40 women on a balance of 'empty nesters' and 'empty bedders' would maximise the opportunities to recruit a sample that were likely to be negotiating at least two of the transitional events identified in the literature review, and thus also likely to be using the Internet to access social support if it was a strategy they had found useful.

However, difficulties in attracting enough women in these two categories, in particular the 'empty nesters', demanded a rethink of this approach, and the assumptions that underpinned it. Given the typical response from participants that their friends didn't meet the research criteria, it became evident that to continue to seek women who met these narrow criteria might result in research findings which were not reflective of contemporary women's midlife experiences. That is, continuing to focus on this narrow group risked producing a skewed and 'artificial' representation of midlife women's experiences. While it is debatable whether the midlife period in women's lives has ever been neatly defined by classic midlife experiences such as negotiating the 'empty nest', as might be suggested by traditional development theory (Rubin, 1979, p. 13), there is certainly evidence that, in some respects at least, the 'blueprint' of women's lives has altered over the last few decades. While Australian statistics indicate little difference in the median age at which this generation of midlife women gave birth, compared to the median age at which their mother's generation gave birth (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), 2009, para. Population characteristics), other indicators suggest midlife women today are likely to be living with more diverse family and work situations (Evans & Kelley, 2004, p. 15) than their mothers experienced. The nuclear family of the 1950s, so beautifully brought to life in early television shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, is no longer a standard feature in many women's lives (if it ever was); the concept of the 'family' is no longer limited to 'mum, dad, and 2.5 children' (Robinson, 2009). Similarly, the notion of children growing up and leaving the 'nest' once they reach maturity has been challenged over the last two decades by a range of changing social and economic factors. Since the 1970s there has been a trend for young adult children to stay living in the family home until a later age (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009e, p. 24). In the 20 years between 1986 and 2006, the proportion of young women aged 20 to 34 who were living in the family home had increased by 36%, from 13% to 18% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009e, p. 24). Even greater is the proportion of young people between 18 and 24 years old who have never left the family home, with recent statistics indicating that 49% of males and 45% of females are still living at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009e, para. Leaving home). Moreover, the tendency for young adults to 'boomerang' between independence and living at home has also increased:

> It is now quite common for young people to move out of home, then return later for a time, perhaps due to a change in circumstances or to save to buy their own home. In 2006–07, 31% of people aged 20–34 years had left their parents' home and returned at some point to again live with their parents. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009e, p. 25)

Other changes impacting on the nature of contemporary families include the increasing number of women who are remaining childless, which more than doubled from 4% of women "who had passed common childbearing age (45-49 years old)" at the time of the 1976 Census, to 9% in 1986 (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), 2009, para. Population characteristics). The most recent Australian statistics on trends in childlessness indicate that "24% of women currently in their reproductive years would never have children" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Similar trends are "also seen in other developed countries, with recent estimates of permanent childlessness for women in the United Kingdom and the United States of America of 20% and 22% respectively" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Therefore, limiting the research criteria to women who are either mothers, or who have recently left a relationship, ignores the lived experiences of women who, for a range of reasons, have reached midlife childless and/or have not been in an intimate relationship for a number of years. While this reappraisal was going on, the number of women interviewed had slowly grown to 26. A decision was made at this point to reframe the research criteria for the remaining research sample, to try and encompass more accurately the diversity of contemporary midlife women's lives. The research criterion for the remaining 14 participants was widened to include women aged between 45 and 55 years who used the Internet for personal use. The following section provides a more detailed overview of the characteristics of the 40 women recruited for this project.

2.4.2   Sample overview

The final sample ended up encompassing a diverse range of women; albeit a relatively homogenous one in terms of ethnic composition. Brief biographies of the women are provided in Appendix 1, while Appendix 1b provides an overview of the participants in terms of age; marital status; employment status; children living at home; children not at home; and parents still living. Figure 1 and Tables 1 to 4 below provide some basic demographic data on the sample group, including age, place of birth, relationship and children status, occupation, and status of parents. The aim of the tabulation is to provide an overview of the backgrounds and lifestyles of the women who were included in the sample group.

Participants by Age
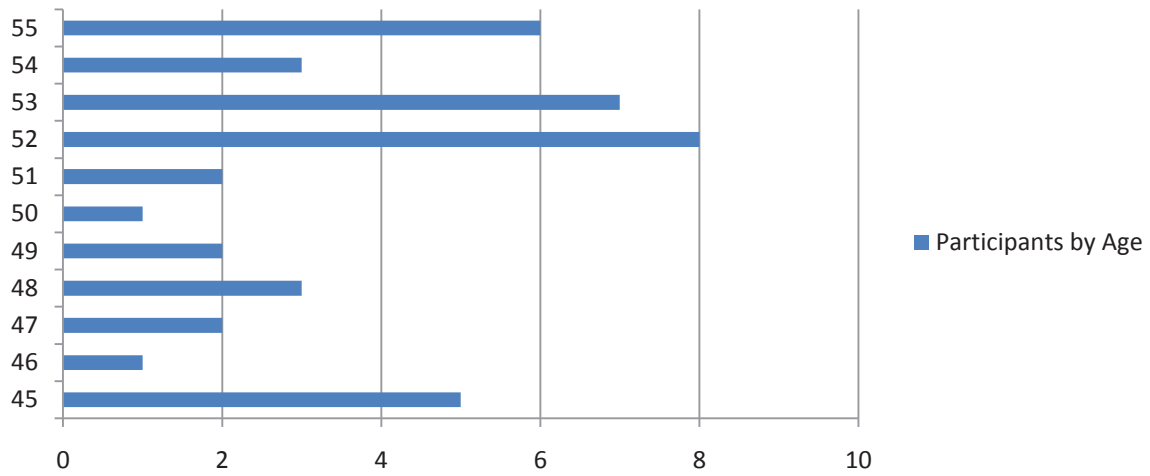
Figure 1:   Participants by Age

Table 1:   Demographic Overview of Participants

	Married/in a relationship	Single, divorced	Single, never married	Total
Dependent children living at home	6	6	-	**12**
Dependent children, not living at home	1	-	-	**1**
Young adult children still living at home	6	-	-	**6**
Empty nester	10	7	-	**17**
Never had children	2	-	2	**4**
Total	**25**	**13**	**2**	

Table 2:   Status of Women's Parents

Both parents living	Only mother living	Only father living	No parents living
14	19	1	6

Table 3:   Participants' Occupation

Admin/Paraprofessional	Professional	Home duties	*Unemployed	Student	Self-Employed
12	15	3	3	3	4

*includes women currently recovering from physical and mental health problems

Table 4:   Participant Country of Birth

Country of birth	Number	Proportion of total sample	Proportion of overseas born in sample	Proportion of overseas born WA residents (2006 Census data)
Western Australia	15	38%		n/a
Australia (not WA)	6	15%		n/a
United Kingdom	12	30%	63%	39.1%
New Zealand	4	10%	21.5%	8.9%
United States	2	5%	11%	Data not available
Sri Lanka	1	2.5%	5%	Data not available

As Table 4 suggests, all but one of the women are representative of the majority culture in terms of ethnic background. In comparing the composition of the research sample with the latest Australian population statistics collected in the 2006 Census, there are some obvious disparities. For example, Census data indicate that 27.1% of people living in Western Australia in 2006 were born overseas, although the proportion of the population of Perth who were born overseas was slightly higher at 31% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007c). In comparison, almost 48% of this research sample was born overseas. As Table 4 indicates, this disparity is mostly due to the large cohort of women in the sample who were born in the United Kingdom and New Zealand; they represent 63% and 21.5% respectively of the proportion of women in this sample who were born overseas, in comparison to the Census data which recorded 39.1% of the overseas born cohort living in Western Australia in 2006 were born in the United Kingdom, while 8.9% recorded their birthplace as New

Zealand (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007c). At the opposite end of the spectrum, only one of the women in this sample, or 5% of the total overseas born cohort, was born in the Asian region, in comparison to Census data which reveals that 15.1% of the total population of people born overseas who were living in Western Australia in 2006, were born in countries in the Asian region (such as Indonesia, China, Philippines and India) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007c).

The disparities between the research population and the wider population can in part be attributed to the use of snowball sampling to recruit 15 of the women who participated in this research. As noted earlier, snowball sampling can result in a research sample which shares similar ethnic, demographic and cultural backgrounds (Penrod et al., 2003, p. 101); the implication of this is that the generalisability of the research findings are compromised by the limitations of the recruitment strategy. In the context of the women participating in this research project, there is some evidence that the snowball recruitment strategy has skewed the sample in terms of the 15 people recruited in that manner, with 8 of the 15, or almost 54% of this group, having been born overseas. To put this figure into some perspective, of the remaining 25 women recruited through alternative methods[7], 10 were born overseas. This equates to 40% of this subsample of 25 women being born overseas. Notwithstanding these limitations, the aim of the research was to provide detailed information and insights into some women's midlife experiences, and the uses they make of the Internet and other communications media in managing these experiences. Given that there was no aim to provide a representative sample, or to generalise from the findings, I believe the touchstone for the success of this project is whether it successfully addresses the overarching research objective and the individual research questions.

2.4.3   The interviews

The decision to use in-depth qualitative interviews was driven by the primary research objective, which was to identify the ways in which women in the target group are using the Internet as a tool to manage family and social relationships and access networks of social support. Qualitative interviews are considered to be an appropriate way to uncover the meanings people ascribe to the objects, experiences, and other people in their lives. In this sense, qualitative interviews can potentially provide a 'window' to the "subjective dimension of the human being" (Polkinghorne, 2005, pp. 137-138). The decision to use one-on-one interviews, as opposed to focus groups, was again based on the research objective. Interviews provide access to rich, deep data. A focus group may provide 90 minutes of transcribable material contributed from the interactions of, say, eight women. Typically, one-on-one interviews with eight women might provide 600 minutes of transcribable

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[7] Apart from the 15 women recruited through snowball sampling, 9 women were recruited through my personal contacts, and the remaining 16 were recruited as a result of a radio interview, and through emails distributed to various women's interests' groups and email distribution lists.

material. In circumstances where it is hard to recruit eligible participants, in-depth interviews offer one way to maximise the participation of each informant. Moreover, it was anticipated that discussions pertaining to women's networks of social support would be likely at times to be sensitive or deal with intimate details of the women's personal lives; details which women may be reluctant to share in a focus-group situation. As such, one-on-one interviews may be more amenable to discussions on the personal and private dimensions of people's lives. Such an opinion is reflected in Green's analysis of the relative merits of focus groups and individual interviews, in her suggestion that "where 'the private' is an important component of the research question, 'the group' is unlikely to deliver the desired data" (1999, p. 42).

In a similar vein, Hawkins, Best and Coney suggest individual in-depth interviews are more appropriate than focus groups in situations which entail "detailed probing of an individual's behaviour, attitudes, or needs"; where the interview covers private and confidential matters, and/or is likely to be of an "emotionally charged or embarrassing nature"; where an understanding of decision-making processes is desired; and where an analysis of "socially acceptable norms" may be influenced by group dynamics (1995, p. 626). While Hawkins et al.'s criteria are designed primarily as a tool for market research, it also provides a useful guide in determining the appropriateness of in-depth interviewing for this particular research project. Certainly, this research required data that revealed, in as much as any interview process can 'reveal' the subjective nature of personal experience, interviewees' 'behaviours, attitudes and needs', particularly as they relate to issues that are of a personal, sensitive, and in some cases 'emotionally charged' nature. Moreover, a focus group situation is unlikely to provide the space and time for individuals to reflect deeply upon the decision-making processes that underpin their communication choices and practices. As the following quote suggests, in-depth interviews provide an opportunity for both parties to develop new insights:

> A good interview lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experiences not only to the interviewer, but also to the interviewee. The process of being taken through a directed, reflective process affects the persons being interviewed and leaves them knowing things about themselves that they didn't know – or at least were not aware of – before the interview. (Patton, 1980, p. 252)

Such a process of self-reflection is evident in an interview with 50 year old Beth. When asked in what ways her use of the telephone might differ from her use of email, it is apparent that in answering the question, Beth moves towards a deeper understanding of her own communication practices:

> I think more personal stuff I would phone, you know? Um, I wouldn't, yeah, if I'm going through a tough time I wouldn't really talk about it in an email, you know? I'd exchange that on the phone. I hadn't thought about that difference, but it is, that's the way it is. And even when I might get an email from the sister that is perhaps down, I'll pick up the phone to respond. (Beth)

Beth's comments suggest that an individual's media practices are sometimes instinctive and unconscious. Through the interview process, Beth has been encouraged to reflect upon her communication choices, and the social factors underpinning those choices. Reflective interviews, held in a "relaxed open-ended environment" therefore provide an opportunity to "retrieve the lived experience of the respondents, locate their behavioural patterns and views, and perceive them in their real context" (H. Leonard, 1992, p. 59).

The interviews, which were recorded digitally, lasted on average one to two hours, although two interviews extended over a period of five hours, with the conversation being punctuated by copious cups of coffee and general social 'chat'. The interviews were loosely structured around a set of interview questions (see Appendices 4a and 4b[8]), which enabled me to address issues relating to the research questions, as well as providing opportunities for participants to discuss in greater depth issues personally relevant to them. The interviews took place in a variety of settings, with venues selected by agreement between myself and the women. Eleven interviews were conducted in public places such as coffee shops, 22 took place at the women's homes, 4 took place at the women's workplaces, 2 were conducted at a tertiary institution, and 1 took place in my own home. From a research perspective, the different venues offered different benefits and drawbacks. Venues such as coffee shops, arguably representing 'neutral territory', have the potential to create a more social and relaxed environment than might be possible in formal environments such as workplaces. The downside of interviewing in public places is the associated noise of other patrons, the clattering of crockery and cutlery, and background music. While this didn't present a problem at the time, it did create major problems with transcription. Transcribing interviews[9] that took place in public places became a protracted task, as background noise made interpreting conversation difficult, and required multiple 'rewinds' to catch muffled or inaudible words. As I did all but five of the transcriptions myself, it was viable, albeit time-consuming, to 'rewind' the digital recording in order to catch muffled words. However, this would not have been tenable had a commercial transcription service been used for interviews recorded in public places; transcription costs would have been beyond the

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[8] Although the questions which the interviews were based around only changed slightly between the original set (Appendix 4a), and a revised set (Appendix 4b) which were developed after the first seven interviews had been conducted, what did change was the focus of my 'listening' and follow up questions posed to the women. For example, in the early interviews my focus was on the individual communication technologies the women identified as using most often, and then I followed this up with questions aiming to understand why they might choose one channel over another. I subsequently shifted my focus to the *relationships* the women referred to in their discussions on their use of ICTs, with follow up questions aiming to understand how different ICTs were implicated in relationship maintenance. In taking this approach, the women's responses often reflected, almost by default, the considerations (either intuitively or strategically) they took into account when choosing appropriate media for communicating with particular family and social network members.

[9] I used a non-commercial transcription software called FootPedal to help me transcribe the interviews which were stored as digital files. FootPedal uses keyboard commands to move through the files, and enabled me to go back over the data as often as necessary in order to get a comprehensive and accurate transcription of the interview.

research budget! Even an interview conducted in what I considered to be a quiet venue (a participant's home) was viewed as including large amounts of background noise by the commercial transcriber employed to transcribe the recording. All interviews were transcribed verbatim; as a novice researcher, I was unsure which material would be relevant, and which less so. While the transcription process was a very protracted and often quite tedious task, it has had the lasting benefit of ensuring I am intimately familiar with the material, and in particular the cadences, intonation and tone of voice which bring life and meaning to the printed transcripts.

During the interviews I also took notes and made observations which helped to construct a more nuanced interpretation of the women's oral accounts. As Polkinghorne contends, observations of "participants' behaviors, facial expressions, gestures, bodily tone, clothing, and other nonverbal indications" can be used to "supplement and clarify data derived from participant interviews" (2005, p. 143). Observational data collected in the interviews helped to create a richer analysis of the women's communication practices, and in some instances, when combined with the interview transcript, provided additional evidence in support of the women's verbal accounts. For example, during an interview that took place in 47 year old Berenice's home, her husband, who worked from home, came into the room some 15 minutes into the 90 minute interview. The initial part of the interview had involved gathering background information such as age, marital status, family situation and so on, and had just moved on to a general discussion on her use of the Internet, so that at the time Berenice's husband entered the room, I knew little more about him than that he was her second husband. His comments on first entering the room indicated that he knew in advance that his wife was going to be interviewed on the topic of women and communication technologies:

> You're trying to do the assignment from hell are you? [question to interviewer] I think you picked the wrong subject [laughs]. (husband)

> Yeah, you'd probably get a different story if you interviewed [husband] on this. (Berenice)

> I've had to get my own computer and hideaway in the corner so I can use it....I'm always having a dig at [wife], she's either on the phone or on the Internet. (husband)

While the transcript data indicates little more than perhaps a somewhat stereotypical, albeit jocular reference to women's communication by Berenice's husband, the opportunity to both observe and be a participant provided me with a richer perspective on the dynamics at play in this communication event. Open and expressive before her husband's appearance, in his presence there appeared to me to be a subtle change in Berenice's manner, to one that was more diffident and non-committal. While her husband's comments were pronounced as fact, Berenice's responses were, for the most part, limited to 'mmm' and 'yeah'; utterances such as might be used to fill awkward silences. It would be going too far to suggest that there was 'tension in the air', but, at least from my perspective, there was some element of disquiet until Berenice's husband had left the room. While I

fully acknowledge the subjective nature of first impressions, I am nevertheless of the opinion that my encounter with Berenice's husband, coupled with my observations of both Berenice and her husband during this period, contributed to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Berenice's communication practices, which in turn have been at least partly shaped by the dynamic within her marriage.

Shortly after her husband left the room, Berenice described the early years of their marriage, when her husband had been "jealous and possessive". As Berenice explained, during this period

> My telephone was my only means of keeping in touch with everybody, 'cause I was never allowed to go anywhere. It's so totally different now. As he's got older he's certainly mellowed....but then of course if I was on the phone and he'd come in he'd go mad, just he was so jealous and insecure he'd always be thinking I'd be talking to men, or that men were ringing me. He'd throw tantrums and yell, and carry on. (Berenice)

Although her comments suggest her husband is no longer so insecure over her use of the telephone, Berenice's husband still exerts a measure of control over his wife's communication, albeit in a more unobtrusive way. While unsure of the process, Berenice is nevertheless convinced her husband has the capacity to track her and her children's Internet activity:

> There's the [Internet] history, but he can go another way where he's got this engine where he can tell, every one of us, what time we're on the computer, how long we're on the computer. See, I wouldn't know where to go for all that. So I'd be too scared to use it for anything like that [online dating, discussion forums etc], because I'd get caught out for sure. (Berenice)

Reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham's concept of the omniscient panopticon, Berenice's belief in her husband's technical expertise serves to control and contain his wife's online activity. Such a perspective is evident in Berenice's response to the question of whether she ever discussed sensitive information through email:

> No, because it would get read if I had anything to say [through emails]. Even though I could delete it, I'd be a bit worried it could be found, so I'd be more likely to ring, and discuss that over the phone, rather than the Internet. Unless I knew it was absolutely secure, and I was on somebody else's computer, say, not that I've ever done it, but if I was on somebody else's computer I would probably discuss information like that then. (Berenice)

On their own, Berenice's comments indicate her thoughts and feelings about the safety of using email to share sensitive information, but they do little to authenticate the validity or 'truth' of her account. Indeed, one of the criticisms levelled at qualitative interviewing is the over-reliance on interviewees' accounts as factual representations of events or experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 143). As Celia Kitzinger cautions, researchers should not assume that "access to experience is gained through the talk" (cited in Silverman, 2006, p. 114). Instead, researchers should place more weight upon "direct observation of the phenomenon of interest" (cited in Silverman, p. 117). Similarly, Byrne reminds readers that rather than a literal account, interviews produce a "particular representation or

account of an individual's views or opinions" (cited in Silverman, 2006, p. 117). However, given that this research project's objectives are focused on examining a particular group of women's experiences related to communication technologies, I suggest that arguments about the subjective nature of the women's accounts are for the most part redundant. Nevertheless, in the case of Berenice's interview, observations taken at the time of the interview serve to validate, at least in part, the authenticity of Berenice's account, and to militate against potential inferences of paranoia or a vivid imagination that may be levelled at Berenice. That Berenice's communication practices are constrained by her belief in her husband's ability to track her online movements is not only indicated by her comments, but are to some extent suggested by the dynamics evident to me when husband and wife were both present in the interview room.

As well as the 'formal' interviews and observations, additional information was collected through a series of emails exchanged between myself and seven of the women in the weeks and months following the initial interview. For the most part, the participants were responding to my request for clarification about information collected during the face-to-face interviews. These 'extended' interviews gave the participants time to consider the questions I asked them, and allowed them to respond at a point that suited them. As the following preliminary response to my desire for further information indicates, my requests not only prompted the women to think about their behaviours and attitudes at this time in their life, but also gave them an opportunity to reflect upon past experiences:

> I will be delighted to fill you in with more info on life!! You are helping to bring back memories for me that I had forgotten about as I get older. It has made me think about all sorts of things. Anyway, I will look at it over the next few days, and try and answer as many questions for you as I can. (Janette)

The resulting responses provided a different dimension of insight into the women's attitudes, behaviours and motivations than was evident during the face-to-face interviews. For some, these emails have provided a channel through which greater degrees of self-awareness and insight have emerged. Following a lengthy interview with 51 year old Ellie, she was motivated to continue a discussion on women's communication through an extended conversation with me via email:

> My understanding and feelings... at this time in our lives our relationships are still probably the most important aspect of us, whether we like it or not (ie some may deny their importance). We have been working on them all our life and hopefully, striving to make them positive and work for us and work for our families which in turn make us feel successful, happy and content and consequently able to pursue other goals and pastimes, positively and happily....I think it is intrinsic to our being, to feel our femaleness and satisfy our need to nurture and mother. (Ellie)

In the context of an ongoing conversation, this research can therefore be seen to have provided a platform for both myself and the participants to develop deeper understandings about the

nature of women's communication practices within the context of our lives as women, wives, mothers, daughters and/or friends.

2.5   Data Analysis

The strategies used to analyse the data stored in the transcripts, as well as email messages exchanged with participants and memos I had written throughout the project, reflect something of a mixed approach. Transcription of interviews took place as soon as possible after individual interviews were conducted. In the early stages of the project, transcripts were coded using the QSR NVIVO software. The aim at this time was to identify some broad conceptual themes, by coding words or phrases that indicated participants' perceptions of the midlife period, their use of online communication channels, and their networks of social support. Initial analysis identified themes such as transition, menopause, empty nest and email, coded as 'free nodes' in the NVIVO program. The identification of themes such as 'empty nest' and 'transition' suggest that I initially drew on concepts already established in the literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 68). As Strauss and Corbin note, while the use of such concepts can be a useful way in which to situate new work within an established body of research, care must be taken to avoid being channelled into standard interpretations which may ultimately limit the researcher's ability to develop new approaches and insights (p. 68). Other free nodes such as 'email' point to a focus in the early interviews on documenting women's use of online communication channels. Four interviews were coded into these broad themes before I hit the metaphorical 'brick wall'. On reflection, a combination of events led to a crisis of confidence in using the data analysis software, and resulted in me re-evaluating my approach to data analysis. As discussed in the section on recruitment, fairly early in the interviewing period difficulties were encountered in recruiting suitable candidates. These difficulties, along with issues that arose during preliminary interviews and data analysis, indicated that certain preconceptions (including the use of established codes) had influenced the nature of interview questions, and threatened to obscure more significant meanings emerging from the data. Lastly, although purely subjective, I felt that the use of the software program decontextualised women's voices, isolating them from the social processes and circumstances which help to situate their stories[10]. After consultation with my supervisor, I made the decision to abandon, at least temporarily, coding using NVIVO, and proceed with manual coding.

Following this decision, all transcripts were manually coded, initially into five broad categories (highlighted by different colours) which encompassed themes relating to women's

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[10] On reflection, my lack of confidence in using NVIVO was also heavily influenced by insufficient training up to this point in using the software. As an inexperienced researcher new to computer-assisted data analysis, I failed to realise that one of the key benefits of qualitative data analysis programs such as NVIVO is that they can actually "make it easier to ground data in context" (Durkin, 1997, p. 93).

experiences of midlife; women's networks of social support; and women's use of ICTs to manage relationships. These five categories were:

1. Women's use of ICTs to manage relationships
2. Women's attitudes towards ICTs (eg. perceptions of social presence; appropriateness; fitting in with other people's communication preferences)
3. Networks of social support
4. Computer-mediated social support
5. Women, midlife and transition

Often sentences or passages fell into multiple categories, indicating interrelationships between themes such as transition and social support. Once the transcripts had been manually coded, and a more extensive range of sub-themes had been identified, a decision was made to begin using NVIVO again, in order to help manage the large amounts of data which had now accumulated. While this roundabout process would undoubtedly be an inefficient way of analysing data for most researchers, on reflection I feel it fits well with my own learning style. Transcribing the majority of the interviews myself, and then manually coding the hard copy transcripts, ensured that I was deeply immersed in my respondents' stories. However, the use of NVIVO towards the end of the coding process facilitated the manipulation of data in a much more efficient manner, enabling passages to be coded for multiple themes and concepts without disturbing the original text. Indeed, one of the key benefits to using NVIVO in this project has been the ability to highlight overlapping codes within a chunk of data. While my initial concerns with using data analysis software related to the perception that it decontexualised women's voices, I subsequently came to realise that the software actually helped to keep the women's voices in context by "emphasizing how the data are embedded in other issues" (Durkin, 1997, p. 96). That is, far from being an impediment to grasping the 'big picture', the software served to clearly illuminate the relationships between the various themes.

It should be noted that while the process of data analysis has been represented here as a discrete and formal activity, in reality data analysis in a much more informal manner occurred throughout the project. As Aly reflects, "data analysis takes place throughout the research process but is rarely documented as such because it does not conform to traditional understandings of formalised data analysis" (2008, p. 40). For Aly, "ongoing cognitive analysis" occurs while reviewing the literature, as well as during interviews when the researcher analyses participants' responses, and uses this information to shape subsequent questions (2008, p. 41). Certainly these informal data analysis processes occurred throughout this research project as well. Additionally, much unstructured data analysis occurred at odd moments of the day and night, as various pieces of information almost unconsciously became synthesised within larger frames of reference. Such random moments of clarity

led to a notebook being left on the bedside table, so that insights that emerged almost unbidden in the middle of the night could be recorded for consideration in the morning.

While perhaps not strictly part of the data analysis process, it is also important to highlight here that another very productive means of working with the data emerged through conversations with supervisors and research consultants, as well as several interested female friends. Indeed, one of the most important breakthroughs in the data analysis process came about as a result of a conversation with a friend. As discussed previously, the initial interview questions focused primarily on which technologies the participants were using to manage relationships. This then framed the preliminary themes identified in early data analysis. However, the analysis quickly became bogged down in trying to fit women's communication practices into neat categories, determined by the communication channel chosen. While it might seem blindingly obvious to the reader that this wasn't the most useful way to understand the social significance of communication technologies in women's lives, at least for me the way forward seemed unclear. It took an email conversation with a very perceptive friend for me to see that the conceptual problems being experienced stemmed from trying to fit the findings from this research project into categories delineated in the literature. As is evident in Chapter Five, previous research on women's use of communication technologies has been relatively neatly defined by the particular communication technology being investigated. For example, both Rakow (1992) and Moyal (1992) focused their research on women's use of the landline telephone, while Holloway and Green (2004), Boneva, Kraut and Frohlich (2001), and Matzko (2002) likewise largely limited their examination of women's communication practices to their use of email[11]. However, as the earlier excerpt from Gina's interview suggests, women's communication practices, and the complex mix of social circumstances that underpin them, defy being neatly categorised. The solution for this project lay in shifting the focus from the *technology* used, to the range of r*elationships* in women's lives, and the mechanisms and strategies (including their use of communication technologies) through which women maintain and nurture those relationships. Once this conceptual adjustment was made, everything else seemed to slot more naturally into place. This shift in focus is evident by comparing the structure of Chapter Five, in which a review of the literature on women's use of ICTs is presented, with Chapter Six, in which the findings from this research project are discussed in detail. While in Chapter Five the material is arranged by individual communication technologies, in Chapter Six, women's use of ICTs is instead examined through the strategies and behaviours they perform in managing particular family and social relationships. Such an approach has been instrumental in developing a detailed account of women's use of ICTs which is grounded in their everyday lives and relationships.

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[11] A notable exception to this pattern of ICT research is Baldassar, Balcock and Wilding's (2007) research, which examines transnational families' use of multiple communication technologies to sustain relationships. However, at the time when I was struggling with the data, I hadn't yet located Baldassar et al.'s research.

2.6   Research Limitations

One of the potential limitations of this research project is that as a result of the relatively small sample size, the project findings cannot be considered representative of women in general. However, as noted, the aim of qualitative research such as this isn't necessarily to produce findings that can be extrapolated across the broader population. Rather, the in-depth nature of the qualitative interviews conducted as part of this research project provides a very rich source of detailed information on a section of the population which is often overlooked. Indeed, the value of qualitative research such as this lies in its potential to develop a deep, multifaceted account of the experiences of a group of people who can best exemplify the phenomenon being studied, rather than the capacity to replicate those findings in the wider community. Of more concern, perhaps, is the lack of ethnic diversity within the sample; while the women were drawn from diverse backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic status, education, employment and family situation, only one woman came from a non-English speaking background (NESB). While this wasn't planned, and probably has occurred as a result of the 'snowball sampling' recruitment strategy, it nevertheless means that these findings may be considered even less representative of the broader midlife female population in Western Australia. However, this limitation may be countered to a degree by the high proportion of the sample born overseas or interstate (62%); data from these women provide valuable insights into the strategies women use to maintain connections with family and friends located throughout the world.

The focus of this research is also limited by necessity; in a thesis such as this, it has not been possible to address all the issues raised in the interviews in the required word count. In particular, this thesis doesn't extend to considering how the women's participation in online dating sites may be viewed as another way though which they are extending their social networks, and developing additional social support connections. Thus, although seven of the women I interviewed have used online dating sites such as RSVP, with varying degrees of success, this is not an area that is covered in this thesis. Hopefully an in-depth analysis of the data I've collected in relation to this issue will appear in future research publications.[12]

The other limitation of this research relates to its focus on midlife women; while one-on-one interviews help to piece together an interpretation of women's communication practices, and the factors that shape *their* communication choices, it is difficult to ascertain how the women's actions are perceived by *other* members of their social networks. This is particularly relevant when considering their relationships with their children; while it is apparent that many of the women are actively working to sustain vibrant connections with children, we are left guessing as to how their

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[12] This topic has been briefly discussed in an article published in the Australian Journal of Communication (Dare, 2007), but I am hoping to develop this topic further.

children perceive their mother's actions, and to what degree they welcome, or perhaps resist or obstruct such approaches. Thus a methodological approach which includes interviewing women *and* their children would be likely to provide insights into how women's communication practices are perceived through their children's eyes, and gauge the degree to which their children's actions influence the nature of the women's communication.

2.7   Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the theoretical perspectives and research methodology applied to this project, as well as describing the methods, techniques and materials used to meet the research objectives. Driven by a desire to develop a comprehensive analysis of women's ICT use grounded in their experiential accounts, a qualitative, interpretive approach was determined to offer the best opportunity to deliver a rich analysis of the social significance of ICTs in midlife women's lives. From this perspective, ethnography, with its focus on the meanings individuals ascribe to everyday situations, was chosen as the most appropriate methodology to deliver successful research outcomes. Informed by insights from both feminist and grounded theory perspectives, this inclusive ethnographic approach has ensured that the resulting analysis of women's ICT use reflects the social context and constructs of women's everyday lives.

An outline of recruitment strategies, interview techniques and data analysis activities has also been included, not only to provide readers with a description of *how* the research was conducted, but also to draw attention to the practical difficulties and conceptual challenges I have encountered during this process. While at times these difficulties have been intensely frustrating, in many instances it has been these little 'hiccups' along the way that have ultimately paved the way for me to develop clearer and conceptually richer insights into the phenomenon being studied. The broad theoretical and methodological approach taken in this project, combined with a range of research strategies and methods considered appropriate to a qualitative, interpretive study, has resulted in an authentic and multidimensional account of the phenomenon of women's ICT use which is deeply embedded in the overarching social realities of contemporary midlife women.

Chapter Three
Transitions in Midlife Women's Lives

3.1   Introduction

Since this research is concerned with the ways in which women communicate and exchange support during their midlife years, it is pertinent to also consider how women experience this period in their lives. Many women in this age group have been performing multiple, and often simultaneous, roles and responsibilities for most of their adult life, whether as carers and nurturers in the domestic/private sphere, active participants in voluntary community and charitable organisations, and/or workers in the paid economy. The midlife years can present challenges to women as the makeup and balance of these roles and responsibilities changes. For some women, the midlife years coincide with them taking on extra responsibility for aged and infirm parents, while at the same time managing their own health needs as they enter menopause. While some may experience a sense of emancipation and renewed energy as their children move out to live independently, others may find their midlife years disrupted by financial insecurity or relationship difficulties.

This chapter seeks to investigate the diverse and complex ways in which this midlife period has been represented in theoretical and clinical accounts, well as in mainstream cultural representations, and then, more importantly, how midlife is experienced and managed by women in their daily lives. Do women experience midlife as a chance to take up new opportunities and challenges; to spend more time exploring activities and interests than might previously have been possible? Or, as Simone De Beauvoir suggests in <u>The Second Sex</u>, does midlife represent the first hint of the "fatal touch of death itself" (1989, p. 576). Such one-dimensional constructions do little to shed light on the uniqueness of each woman's personal reality, and even less on how they manage the physiological transitions and the changes in interpersonal relationships and individual social circumstances that are synonymous with this period in women's lives. A more inclusive account would acknowledge that women's lives are "rich in the most bizarre of complexities and combinations" (Rowbotham, cited in Daly, 1997, p. 173), and this is perhaps never truer than during the midlife years. There is, therefore, no singular, true midlife experience. There are instead multiple authentic experiences; multiple narratives that woven together form a complex whole of meanings and knowledge. The aim of this chapter therefore is to fill in some details of the 'organic tapestry' that defines the midlife period, so as to provide a more meaningful basis to consider the role that information and communication technologies play in women's lives during these transitional years.

This chapter begins by examining theoretical, clinical and cultural constructions of menopause, one of the key transitional experiences in most midlife women's lives[13]. The analysis includes consideration of the biomedical model of menopause which has dominated medical approaches to menopause, as well as an exploration of the cultural mythology and attitudes associated with menopause and menopausal women. These perspectives are then compared with findings from empirical research, including this current research project, which demonstrate how women perceive and experience menopause on a subjective level. Following this, the notion of the midlife years as characterised by transition is explored more holistically by considering other changes that take place during this period in women's lives, including the 'empty nest', the 'empty bed' and the ageing and death of parents.

3.2   Constructions of Menopause

3.2.1   Theoretical, clinical and cultural accounts of menopause

"*The climacteric is a mysterious time about which sinister myths continue to cling*" (Greer, 1991, p. 3).

Theoretical and clinical accounts of menopause have traditionally represented this transition as a negative and traumatic stage in women's lives (Cowan, Warren, & Young, 1985, p. 10; Gergin, 1990, p. 477; Martin, 1997, p. 246). An early example of this perspective was put forward by Helene Deutsch, a protégé of Sigmund Freud, who claimed that "menopause is the stage of life at which women's service to the species ends....In other words, woman's usefulness is tied to her fertility and her life, such as it is, is over at menopause" (cited in Hall & Jacobs, 1992, p. 13). Moreover, since at least the middle of the Twentieth Century menopause has been constructed as a health issue, requiring medical intervention (Gannon & Ekstrom, 1993, p. 276). An early example of the biomedical approach to menopause is evident in the best-selling book <u>Feminine Forever</u>, published in 1966. According to the author, Dr Robert Wilson, menopause is a curable disease caused by a deficiency of oestrogen, just as diabetes is caused by a lack of insulin (Wilson, 1966, p. 19). The failure of a women's ovaries to continue to produce oestrogen beyond midlife leads to a "living decay" (Wilson,

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[13] According to the Council of Affiliated Menopause Societies (CAMS), the term *menopause* is defined as the "permanent cessation of menstruation resulting from the loss of ovarian follicular activity. Natural menopause is recognized to have occurred after 12 consecutive months of amenorrhea, for which there is no other obvious pathological or physiological cause. Menopause occurs with the final menstrual period (FMP) which is known with certainty only in retrospect a year or more after the event. An adequate biological marker for the event does not exist" (cited in Australasian Menopause Society, 2008). In the context of this thesis, the term *climacteric* might more appropriately describe the period of transition accompanying menopause. CAMS describes the climacteric as "[t]he phase in the ageing of women marking the transition from the reproductive phase to the non-reproductive state" (cited in Australasian Menopause Society, 2008).

p. 39) which not only destroys her health, but more insidiously her character as well (Wilson, 1966, p. 21). According to Wilson, up to 75% of menopausal women will suffer a range of problems:

> The tissues dry out, the muscles weaken, the skin sags. The bones ... become brittle and porous....Deprived of its natural fluids by the general desiccation of tissues, the entire genital system dries up. The breasts become flabby and shrink, and the vagina becomes stiff and unyielding....Additional physical consequences [include]....nervousness, irritability, anxiety, apprehension, hot flushes, night sweats, joint pains, melancholia, palpitations, crying spells, weakness, dizziness, severe headaches, poor concentration, loss of memory, chronic indigestion, insomnia. (Wilson, 1966, pp. 37-38)

Some more recent research continues to construct menopause and midlife as triggering major physical and psychological challenges in women's lives. For example, a comparative study of medical doctors, nurses and lay women's perceptions of menopausal symptoms supported earlier research which indicated that medical personnel "believe menopause to be more traumatic than most women do" (Cowan et al., 1985, p. 10). The authors suggest part of the reason for this discrepancy is that doctors are more likely to see women suffering discomfort during this period, and therefore generalise their observations of a minority of women seeking treatment for distressing menopausal symptoms, to menopausal women in general (Cowan et al., p. 11).

Moreover, the language used in medical texts continues to frame this physiological transition in fundamentally negative terms. For example, the most recent edition of the Dictionary of Medical Syndromes lists menopause symptoms as "Hot facial flashes; chills; sweats; tachycardia; palpitations; nervousness; insomnia; irritability; depression; ... hypertrophy of the breasts; abnormal uterine bleeding..." (cited in Deeks, 2006, p. 70). Recommended treatments for this diverse range of symptoms are listed as "sedation; barbiturate; benzodiazepines ... amphetamine or bromazepam and HT" (cited in Deeks, p. 70). As Deeks suggests, "these negative symptoms and terminology perpetuate a negative view of what menopause is all about" (p. 70). That menopause can be viewed in mostly negative tones by some medical practitioners is reflected in the following comment by one of the women in my current research project. Chris, a 46 year old mother of two teenagers, had been bothered by increasing episodes of moodiness, and asked her doctor if she could have a hormone test to see whether hormonal changes could be part of the problem:

> My family thought I'd lost the plot, and I asked my [doctor] if I could have a menopause, hormone test, and he said I wasn't even bordering it. And I said, "Oh aren't I?", and he said "No, what are you worrying about? Once you're bordering it you lost all the elasticity and all this happens and that happens. (Chris)

Just as theoretical and clinical accounts of women's midlife experiences over the last 100 years have focused heavily on negative aspects of ageing and menopause, so too have cultural representations of midlife and the menopausal woman. Indeed, in the introduction to a special issue of the journal Psychology of Women Quarterly dedicated to women in midlife, the authors assert that "Western culture has a long legacy of ageism, and negative stereotypes about growing old are

reflected in art, literature, and the media, as well as in the psychological literature on aging" (Fodor & Franks, 1990, p. 445). In the Second Sex, first published in 1949, Simone De Beauvoir described the socially and biologically prescribed path for women as they pass through menopause as "the dangerous age" (1989, p. 575). According to De Beauvoir

> Whereas man grows old gradually, woman is suddenly deprived of her femininity; she is still relatively young when she loses the erotic attractiveness and the fertility which, in the view of society and in her own, provide the justification of her existence and her opportunity for happiness. With no future, she still has about one half of her adult life to live. (1989, p. 575)[14]

Unfortunately, too often cultural representations of women in midlife and beyond fail to acknowledge the distinction between women's behaviour, and the socially constructed codes and practices that determine and limit those behaviours. To a large degree these codes and practices are embedded in everyday language, as well as in textual and visual representations in our media-saturated, consumer-driven world. As Komesaroff, Rothfield and Daly note

> The public discourse is one in which the menopausal woman is seen as ageing, as infirm, as socially contaminated. These perceptions are reinforced through the marketing of health, fitness, youth, sexuality, and medicine itself....Indeed, these negative accounts of menopause are now so culturally intrusive that it is difficult for women to resist them. (1997, p. 8)

This public discourse became intense during the 1990s, when there was an explosion of interest in 'menopause' as a medical, social and cultural phenomenon; anecdotes, advice, expert opinions and warnings were circulated through newspapers, women's magazines, television talk shows, and books[15] targeting a mature female audience (Gullette, 1997, p. 176). It is perhaps no coincidence that this escalation in interest occurred just as the first wave of the Baby Boomer generation began to experience menopause. As Gullette puts it, "women were inundated with menopause discourse: all the loss, misery, humiliation, and despair supposedly in store for us unless we took the pharmaceutical exit from female midlife ageing" (p. 176). Paralleling this public discourse was an "overwhelmingly negative" representation of midlife women in film and television (Rostosky & Travis, 1996, p. 285). Echoing Helene Deutsch's psychoanalytic construction of the midlife woman as 'past her prime' (cited in Hall & Jacobs, 1992, p. 13), Gullette argues this pervasive cultural discourse could more accurately be described as a "life-course decline narrative", with the

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[14] It could be argued that De Beauvoir, rather than inscribing menopausal and postmenopausal women with attributes considered part of the essential 'female' nature, was instead critiquing the constrictive role that patriarchal society had bequeathed her. As she so famously stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (1989, p. 267).

[15] Gail Sheehy's bestseller The Silent Passage, published in 1993, was one of the earlier examples of this genre of books.

pivotal event, *menopause*, "crudely divid[ing] all women's lives into two parts, the better Before and the worse After, with menopause the magic marker of decline" (p. 177).

Over the intervening 10 or so years since this "menoboom" (Gullette, 1997, p. 176), there has been a plethora of books, targeted both at lay people and medical practitioners, as well as academic and clinical research, which have attempted to present a more balanced view of this period in women's lives[16]. Despite this progress, the notion that menopause is a universally difficult time for women – a critical 'event' that entails despair and loss - continues to be perpetuated, as illustrated by the following description for the book The Sexy Years: Discover the Hormone Connection: The secret to fabulous Sex, Great Health, and Vitality, for Women and Men, published in 2005:

> Getting older can be brutal - women gain weight, lose their sex drive, experience hot flashes, suffer memory loss, become short-tempered, find it difficult to sleep, and on and on. It's not so easy for men, either - they start to lose energy and stamina as they age, too (and they have to live with women going through menopause). After years of being thin and fit and full of energy, Suzanne herself encountered the "Seven Dwarfs of Menopause" - Itchy, Bitchy, Sweaty, Sleepy, Bloated, Forgetful, and All-Dried-Up. Instead of living out the rest of her life cranky, sleep-deprived, and libido-less, Suzanne set out to discover how she could get her mind, body, and life back and banish those pesky dwarfs for good. (Amazon, 2007)

Through such emotionally–laden language, the "various socially sustained 'goblins' of menopause" (Gergen, 2001, p. 117) continue to circulate through our cultural imaginary. It's no wonder, then, that the battle for a more informed approach to the issue of menopause and midlife appears to have not yet been won. As Dr Mandy Deeks, a psychologist with one of Australia's foremost women's healthcare organisations, suggests, even today "when we think about what menopause means, it is to be dreaded and feared as a time of confusion and suffering" (2006, pp. 69-70).

So far this chapter has explored the theoretical, clinical and cultural representations of menopause and the midlife experience that have permeated western society. In some respects it could be argued that these representations are akin to observing life through a window, without actually participating in the action. As such, they give only half the story. For example, many medical accounts of menopause focus on the negative aspects of this transition, despite evidence which indicates the majority of women do not view menopause as a significantly disturbing event in their lives (Cowan et al., 1985, p. 10; Neugarten, Wood, Kraines, & Loomis, 1968). What is missing from these accounts is the woman's perspective; what meanings do women *themselves* make of the

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[16] A search of Amazon.co.uk for books on menopause in mid-January 2008 retrieved 1,164 items – 11 of which were listed as having been published in the first two weeks of 2008. Titles included Is it me or is it hot in here? A modern woman's guide to the menopause; Menopause for dummies, The menopause survival kit: Makes aging a breeze!, and Menopause Sucks: What to Do When Hot Flashes and Hormones Make You and Everyone Else Miserable. Notable amongst academic and clinical researchers who have investigated women's own perspectives on this period in their lives are Gergen (2001; 1990), and Leonard & Burns (2006).

experience of midlife and menopause. Do they, as the cultural mythology would suggest, dread it as a symbol of their lost youth, fertility, health and vitality? Worse still, are they destined to live out their days "cranky, sleep-deprived, and libido-less"? (Amazon, 2007). The following section explores this issue in more detail, through an examination of empirical research that gives a voice to women's own attitudes and experiences of midlife and menopause.

3.2.2 *Women's perspectives on menopause*

As indicated in the previous paragraph, a significant amount of research over the last 40 years suggesting the cultural stereotype of the menopausal woman as 'dried-up', irritable or even depressed, doesn't appear to be a particularly relevant description of most women's midlife experiences. Indeed, there is strong evidence that suggests this stereotype has never accurately represented *most* women's experiences of midlife and the postmenopausal years. Just two years after Feminine Forever (1966) described menopause as a 'living decay', new research indicated that while some midlife women viewed "the menopause as unpleasant and disturbing", they balanced these feelings with a recognition that it is a temporary condition, and a belief that the postmenopausal period is not to be feared. As such, they viewed menopause as an unimportant event when considered over the whole life cycle (Neugarten et al., 1968, p. 200).

Similar 'whole of life' perspectives come through in research by Neugarten (1979, p. 889), Reinke, Ellicott, Harris and Hancock (1985, p. 269), Mercer, Nichols and Doyle (1989, p. 26), Gullette (1997, p. 180), Howell (2001, p. 56), King, Hunter and Harris (2005, p. 17) and Leonard and Burns (2006, p. 29). A common theme in this body of research is the lack of emphasis postmenopausal women place on menopause as a significant life transition. As Gullette notes, "for most women who have stopped menstruating, it's probably safe to say that the incident doesn't loom large in their whole life story" (1997, p. 180). Similarly, recent research by Leonard and Burns into self-perceived turning points in the lives of midlife and older women found that those issues most commonly associated with midlife transition, "such as the 'empty nest' or menopause, were rarely mentioned" (2006, p. 29).

This is not to deny that the menopausal experience can be a very difficult experience, physically and/or emotionally, for some women. According to a leading Western Australian gynaecologist Dr Margaret Smith, "about 50 percent of women have no physical or emotional trouble at all....[but] for a small minority it is almost a death before death, with sweeping changes, both physical and emotional, which are barely tolerable" (cited in M. Smith & Michalka, 2006, pp. 2-3). Such a pattern is reflected in a study of 150 midlife Australian women drawn from a range of demographic, socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, in which 20 women classified themselves "as having an extremely negative experience" (Daly, 1997, p. 164). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Daly's study found that "twenty-five of the women ... were 'gliding' their way through menopause"

(p. 170), experiencing only minor problems, while the remaining majority of women "were managing with some degree of success to keep a balance in their lives despite problems" (p. 167). These proportions are relatively similar to more recent statistics which indicate that "not all women suffer from signs of menopause, in fact 20 percent have no symptoms. Some 60 percent have mild symptoms, while only 20 percent suffer severe symptoms" (The Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health, 2007).

So which of the 'symptoms' and 'problems' women experience during this midlife period can be directly related to the hormonal changes that take place during menopause, and what does the empirical evidence say about how women experience and manage these 'symptoms'? According to Smith and Michalka, the "five cardinal symptoms of menopause are cessation of periods; hot flushes (plus or minus sweats); a change in sleep patterns; a feeling of ants crawling under the skin; [and] a dry vagina" (2006, p. 26). Of these, "hot flushes and vaginal atrophy (thinning of the vaginal skin) are the two symptoms that have been consistently and conclusively linked to hormonal changes at menopause" (Deeks, 2006, p. 26). Other symptoms that may occur at the same time, but have not been proven to be directly related to the hormonal changes, include anaemia, thyroid problems, depression, tiredness, anxiety, mood swings, loss of libido, aches and pains, memory problems and sleep problems (M. Smith & Michalka, 2006, p. 27-28; The Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health, 2006, 2007).

Empirical research, cross-cultural epidemiological studies, and anecdotal evidence clearly indicate that hot flushes and night sweats are the most common symptom of menopause (Freeman & Sherif, 2007, p. 197; Guthrie, Dennerstein, Taffe, Lehert, & Burger, 2004, p. 381; M. Smith & Michalka, 2006, p. 109), affecting "up to 80 per cent of women who go through menopause" (Deeks, 2006, p. 26).[17] Indeed, so common are hot flushes among women in midlife, that much of the humour in the hit theatre show, Menopause the Musical revolves around the female actors frantically fanning themselves as they perspire profusely. While this musical highlights the funny side of menopause, there is no doubt that for some women, hot flushes are no laughing matter. Although some women will never experience hot flushes, and others may only ever have one or two mild flushes, many women experience dozens of flushes every day along with sleep-interrupting night sweats. The

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[17] It has been suggested that women are more likely to report menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes in societies where menopause is 'medicalised'; this therefore accounts for why Japanese women report lower rates of these symptoms than their European and North American counterparts (Freeman & Sherif, 2007, p. 210). However, as Smith and Michalka note, "HRT has not been generally available to women in Japan whereas it has been to North American women, so that in ordinary medical practice in Japan no relevant questions are asked" (M. Smith & Michalka, 2006, p. 112). They cite a presentation at the 1996 International Menopause Congress, where the Japanese presenter "claimed that many Japanese women in modern Japan have suffered silently" (M. Smith & Michalka, 2006, p. 112). Thus the issue may not be so much whether cultural constructions of menopause influence the incidence and reporting of menopausal symptoms, but whether specific cultural conditions encourage a more open dialogue on menopause and menopausal symptoms.

Melbourne Women's Midlife Health Project, a community-based, longitudinal study of 400 women conducted between 1991 and 2000 found that approximately 75% of their participants "reported suffering bothersome hot flushes at some time during the [menopausal] transition" (Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 381). The distress and discomfort hot flushes can induce should not be underestimated. The "sweating, reddening and palpitations [that] often accompany a hot flush" (Deeks, 2006, p. 26) can be "extremely debilitating and distressing" (M. Smith & Michalka, p. 109), making "social life impossible" (M. Smith & Michalka, p. 112).

Central to the stereotype of the menopausal woman is the notion that she is depressed and anxious (M. Smith & Michalka, 2006, p. 131). Certainly, in Daly's study, of the 20 women who had extremely negative experiences, 12 "identified their major problem as a high level of depression, starting with increased premenstrual stress that steadily worsened as their periods became more irregular" (1997, p. 164). However, a number of studies have shown no direct causal relationship between menopause and clinical depression (Daly, 1997, p. 164; Deeks, 2006, p. 46; Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 386; M. Smith & Michalka, 2006, p. 117). Moreover, the Melbourne Women's Midlife Health Project found that "mood, self-rated health and life satisfaction were not directly related to the menopausal transition" (Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 386). While depression can certainly be an issue for some women during the menopausal period, it appears more likely to develop in response to a complex combination of factors, such as other changes in women's lives during this time, as well as the presence of pre-existing depressive tendencies, rather than being directly related to hormonal fluctuations (Deeks, 2006, p. 47; Guthrie et al., p. 386; M. Smith & Michalka, p. 132). Depression and anxiety can also be associated with disrupted sleep patterns brought on by night sweats; chronic tiredness can reduce a woman's resilience and coping abilities (The Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health, 2007). As Deeks suggests, "if you have had four hours of broken sleep because of hot flushes and sweats – have to change the sheets twice in a night – then you are likely to be tired, less motivated, irritable and not able to think clearly" (p. 47).

3.2.3 *Current research findings: Women's experiences of menopause*

Certainly, while menopausal symptoms were experienced as irritating by many of the women interviewed in my research, overall, menopause did not emerge as a difficult or unmanageable challenge in these women's lives. Hot flushes appeared to be the most common physical symptom of menopause, with just over 60% of participants having experienced them to varying degrees. Most appeared to be coping well with them, viewing the hot flushes as an inconvenience and a discomfort, rather than as particularly distressing. This notion of hot flushes as little more than an irritating physical symptom, rather than a sign of a major emotional watershed in her life, is reflected in 53 year old Lois's reflections:

> You know, I don't consider it [menopause] as any sort of particularly significant time
> in my life, it's just [that] I get irritated with the symptoms. But in much the same way

as I would be irritated by a bad back or hay fever, as I've had over the years. I look at it in the same sort of light. That at the moment I'm having these rather irritating symptoms that are interfering with my day-to-day life and bugging me, but not particularly that they're significant as a... you know, as a marker as it were, particularly. (Lois)

While some women have chosen to manage these symptoms with either hormone replacement or alternative 'natural' therapies, with varying degrees of success, several women did find these menopausal symptoms particularly uncomfortable. Pat, a 45 year married woman with two adult children, found hot flushes were particularly difficult to manage in the workplace:

The main worry was the hot flushes. I couldn't stand it, especially at work. You know, you'd be dripping wet and couldn't concentrate on what you were doing....I used to think that women were complaining about nothing, but it's definitely not. It's definitely not. I'd sleep less – it was waking me up at night, and you don't get a good night's sleep because of it. (Pat)

As Pat indicates, one of the key issues related to hot flushes and night sweats is the extent to which they disrupt sleep (Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 381; The Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health, 2007), and the flow-on effects this can have on a woman's well-being (Deeks, 2006, p. 47). Most of the women who had experienced hot flushes had also had night sweats, although again the extent to which these seriously interrupted sleep patterns varied. Busy as a part-time administrative assistant, a volunteer organiser in a local community group, and as a grandmother of four young children, Raelene has found the most difficult aspect of menopause is the hot flushes and associated tiredness:

Do you get hot flushes?[18]

Yes. And sometimes that can wake you up. 'Cause I go to sleep fine, then two or three in the morning, that's what will wake me up, and I'm wringing wet. And even though I'm on [hormone replacement] treatment, I still get them. It's embarrassing because you get so hot you're wet. I hate that.....See I never got depression from, it... it's the sleep. I go to sleep, and then you wake up two hours later, and then you're wide awake. So for three months I did that, and in the end I went to the doctor and said "Look, I'm depressed." She said, "No you're not, you're sleep deprived." Because you're working, well you do start crying, because you're exhausted. And then you start having little panic attacks because you're trying to go back to sleep and you can't. And I'd say that's one of the worst things about menopause is that, and the hot flushes. (Raelene)

For others, the relief of being freed from monthly periods overshadowed the discomfort of hot flushes. Fifty three year old Vicki, who began to experience hot flushes when she was 46, felt at first that she was too young to be menopausal, and so initially dismissed the symptoms. As the realisation dawned on her that she was indeed in the throes of menopause, her initial reaction was "I'm too young

[18] Throughout this thesis, when material from the interviews is included, italicised text is used to distinguish my questions or comments to the participants from the participants' comments. Participants' responses are in plain text.

for this, it only happens to old ladies. You come to the realisation that perhaps you are an old lady [laughs]." However, such feelings were fleeting, quickly replaced by relief at no longer having to endure debilitating periods:

> I didn't have a lot of time to focus on it, but I think I was relieved that my periods had stopped, 'cause I used to get painful periods. So that was a relief! You just start to think about the positives. No more periods – great! (Vicki)

Only one woman described the menopausal time as deeply distressing both physically and emotionally. For Gillian, severe menopausal symptoms set in after undergoing a hysterectomy. As Gillian describes it, she experienced

> huge sweats and flushes and panic attacks. Panic attacks around about when I was 45, so probably a couple of years after the hysterectomy, and huge sweats, and huge emotional swings. Moody, and the other thing that would happen to me is that I would be completely blank in the mind. Brain, whatever, couldn't recall things at all. Horrible feeling, when you've been so switched on. You know, professional woman. It's quite scary because when you go blank, and you just don't know the word... it's sort of, it's sitting there, but you just can't verbalise it. It's extremely scary. (Gillian)

However, as Gillian explained during the interview, a subsequent diagnosis of a thyroid disorder had most likely contributed to, or at least exacerbated many of the emotional problems she experienced during this period, as well as compounding many of the physical symptoms. Likewise, Vicki attributes many of the anxiety and panic attacks she experienced during menopause to the fact that at the time she was living in an abusive relationship, rather than these physical symptoms being directly related to menopause. The role that other stressors may play during the menopausal period is also highlighted by 51 year old Katherine's reflections on difficulties she had experienced in both her personal and professional life several months before her interview took place:

> Mmm, I think that's when I ended up going to the doctor, when I was just about to go back to work ... I said, I can't turn this anxiety off, I think I'm, you know, peri-menopausal, I think I'm going into menopause. Dad's just gone into a home [with dementia], and I'm about to go back to work in this horrible situation, and she [doctor] just said, you need help. There was something else as well, all these things, all at once....So the menopause was kind of just the icing on the cake. (Katherine)

As Gillian, Katherine and Vicki's stories suggest, at least some of the difficulties commonly attributed to menopause may in fact be influenced by a range of other problems in women's lives. This finding echoes previous research, which has consistently found that "women who experienced difficulties with menopause had concurrent personal life crises" (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 26). As these comments suggest, the menopausal transition period is marked by a diverse and complex range of changes in other areas of women's lives which extend far beyond just physiological changes. During this period a woman may have to adjust to role transitions, as children leave the family home – perhaps leaving and returning several times before they finally leave permanently. It is also likely that during their 40s and 50s women will have to face the ageing and death of one or both parents. In some

cases women will also become responsible for caring for infirm parents, whether that involves administering day to day care in the home environment, or managing their parent's transition to an aged-care facility. It can also be a time for a renewed emphasis on career, sometimes involving a complete change in career direction (Waskel & Phelps, 1995, p. 1212), or a time to re-evaluate intimate relationships. The following sections explore the most common changes in women's lives during their midlife years, through an analysis of theoretical and empirical accounts.

3.3   The 'Empty Nest'

3.3.1   The 'empty nest': Theoretical and empirical accounts

Apart from menopause, the issue that has come to be almost synonymous with midlife women is the 'empty nest', commonly used to describe the sense of loss that women may experience as their children become independent and leave the family home. Embedded deeply within the notion of the 'empty nest' is the image of a lonely and depressed woman who no longer has a useful role in life. Having spent their adult lives caring for their children, these women "suddenly seem redundant" (Viney, 1980, p. 134). This is reflected in the research focus, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, on the 'empty nest' as a major transitional point in women's lives (Daly, 1997, p. 162; Fodor & Franks, 1990, p. 446; Rubin, 1979; Sheehy, 1993, p. 152; Viney, 1980); the implication from these accounts is that the mothering role encapsulates the normative experience of midlife for all women. In her introduction to the topic of the 'empty nest', Linda Viney constructs this period as a negative experience for many women: "As they have grown used to providing support for their children, and developed pride in doing so well, they suddenly seem redundant. Assumptions about themselves in their child-oriented roles are shattered" (1980, p. 134). A similar suggestion is implicit in the publisher's note for Lillian Rubin's influential book Women of a Certain Age: The Midlife Search for Self: "Here are all the issues and milestones of the maturing woman's life – her ambivalence at watching the kids leave home ... the effort to discover a new identity not tied to mothering and homemaking" (Rubin, 1979, back cover page).[19]

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[19] It should be noted here that both Viney and Rubin's research was conducted in the late 1970s with sample groups of women for whom paid work outside the home was not the norm. It could be argued, therefore, that their research findings simply reflect the fact that as fulltime homemakers and mothers, the women they interviewed may have been more preoccupied with their role as a mother than women who are also employed in full-time work. However, a review of more recent literature on psychological aspects of midlife reveals a continuing tendency to orient the adjustments needed of women during this period around the normative model of 'women as mothers'. The following passage is indicative of the degree to which this model continues to permeate theoretical accounts of midlife.

> As children grow up and enter adolescence and young adulthood, a woman's role becomes one of launching children. As children become more independent, another door closes for their mother. For women who have devoted much of their time to child care and childbearing, this empty nest often brings with it increased risk of developing depression. (King et al., 2005, p. 25)

As Rubin explained in her classic study, the 'empty nest syndrome' describes the depression and distress some women suffer when their children leave the family home. While most women work their way through the "normal processes of grief and mourning", some women fail to adjust to this fundamental change to their core identity. "Instead, [psychological theory] ... characterized [such women] as neurotic – pathological in their inability to separate from their children, in their incapacity to manage internal conflict without breakdown" (Rubin, 1979, p. 13). While theories relating to the empty nest subsequently developed to acknowledge constricting social environments which "make it always difficult, sometimes impossible, for a mother to develop an identity that rests on alternative roles", the belief persisted, at least in theories of psychological development and stereotypical constructions of midlife women, that "depression in midlife women is linked to the departure of their children, that it is the loss of the mothering role that *produces* [italics added] the sadness and despair" (Rubin, p. 14). In Viney's research conducted in the late 1970s, themes of "loneliness and loss" are woven throughout the women's stories (1980, p. 136). Comments such as "when the last one left, I had no one to talk to" and "I don't cry all the time (*as she dried her tears*), but I am unhappy most of the time" illustrate the deep sense of loss, and at times depression, these women felt (Viney, p. 136). While a few women welcomed their children's departure, their experiences did not appear to be the 'norm'. And yet, other empirical accounts offer a more nuanced perspective on how women experience these inevitable changes in the family life cycle. As Rubin's research highlights, although some of the 160 women she interviewed were sad or even depressed, overwhelmingly these feelings were not related to their children's departure. Indeed, as Rubin notes, "almost all the women I spoke with respond to the departure of their children, whether actual or impending, with a decided sense of relief" (p. 15). This relief comes through strongly in the following comment by one of Rubin's participants:

> I can't tell you what a relief it was to find myself with an empty nest. Oh sure, when the last child went away to school, for the first day or so there was a kind of a throb, but believe me, it was only a day or two. (Rubin, 1979, p. 15)

A rich vein of research since Viney and Rubin's accounts were published strongly supports the notion that women overwhelmingly welcome their grown children moving out (Daly, 1997, p. 168; Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 382; Hunter & Coope, 1993, p. 22; R. Leonard & Burns, 2006, p. 31; Mercer et al., 1989, p. 127; Neugarten, 1979, p. 889). Indeed, recent research suggests midlife women anticipate their child's departure and prepare both for this transition in their lives, and the inevitable changes it will bring to their relationship with young adult children (deVries, Kerrick, & Oetinger,

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Although the authors qualify their statement by noting that other women may view this period as a "relief", and "an opportunity for new freedom" (King et al., 2005, p. 25), the prevailing message the reader is left with is the daunting challenges facing women in midlife as they negotiate changes in core roles. That is, within this model of development, changes in family structure can trigger major psychological adjustments in midlife women by directly impacting upon their roles and responsibilities as mothers (Apter, 1996, p. 557).

2007, p. 14). As deVries, Kerrick and Oetinger's research suggests, it may actually be fathers who, having failed to anticipate or indeed even recognise that their children's departure may impact on them personally, experience more negative effects in response to the 'empty nest' transition than do mothers (p. 14). Contrary to the stereotypical image of the 'empty nest' mother mourning the loss of her children, research also indicates that women's sense of wellbeing and life satisfaction actually increases once their children leave home (Apter, 1996, p. 557; Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 382; Hunter & Coope, 1993, p. 22). In fact, research by Neugarten (1970) identified the post parental stage, which in the 1960s mostly occurred in women's 50s, as being the most satisfying of all life stages (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 15). On a similar note, investigators on the Melbourne Midlife Women's Health Project found, "for the majority of women, the departure of the last child from the household leads to positive changes in women's mood state and a reduced number of daily hassles" (Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 382).

Perhaps not surprisingly then, the return of children to the family home has been found to impact negatively on women's mood and wellbeing (Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 382; Neugarten, 1979, p. 889). As both Leonard and Burns (2005), and Dennerstein, Dudley and Guthrie's (2002) research indicates, the 'revolving door' may be a concept that more accurately defines some families than does the 'empty nest', as grown children 'boomerang' between the family home and other accommodation. The stress that this 'revolving door' can have is expressed by one of Leonard and Burns participants: "One spoke of 'a bloody relief' when her children left permanently, because they had spent 3 years moving out and back home again" (2006, p. 31).

3.3.2 *The 'empty nest': Current research findings*

The findings of this research project reflect the diversity of contemporary midlife women's experiences, and the complex mix of emotions that often accompany the launching phase of parenthood. Of the 36 mothers in the sample group, 17 could be considered 'empty nesters', as all their children had left home permanently. Seven of the 36 still had all their children at home on a permanent basis, while the remaining 12 either had some of their children still at home, or had children who were living at home on a part-time or temporary basis. Overwhelmingly children's departure from the family home was viewed by their mothers as a natural stage in their children's move to full independence. This is not to diminish the fact that for some women the process of children moving out of home brings with it a certain degree of ambivalence about this change in their lives. Such a dynamic is evident in 49 year old Joy's thoughts on the prospect of her last and youngest child moving out of home: "Yeah, I mean I'll miss [son] like heck when he goes. But it'll be good when he goes as well, but he just can't afford it [at the moment] [laughs]."

While Joy's comments suggest she's anticipating a certain level of emotional distress when her son eventually moves out of home, several women expressed pride in the fact that their children had grown into independent young people, and highlighted the important role they, as mothers, have

played in helping develop this independence. In an interview with Lois, a married woman with two young adult children who have both lived away from home for some time, she stressed that the natural and healthy process is for children to "grow up and ... go." In Lois's words, "That's what you bring them up for." Similarly, 49 year old Lyn explained how "positive and wonderful" it is to see her daughter buying her own house at 22, and "starting a new phase of her life". In fact, according to Lyn the death of her beloved dog just after her last child left home was much more distressing than her children's departure!

In reflecting on other women's surprised responses to her ready acceptance of her children's departure, Lois suggested that many women seem to experience their children leaving home as something that 'happens to them'. In contrast, Lois explained to me that she didn't view her children's departure as something that was 'happening' to her at all. From her comments, it is apparent that Lois doesn't construct herself as a passive agent in this transitional process, but rather as someone who has played an active role in supporting her children's move to independence and self-determination. However, it is evident from both Lois and Lyn's accounts that their response to their children's departure isn't necessarily a 'socially sanctioned' way for a mother to behave. These women shared stories of other women's surprise or shock that they should actually welcome or actively encourage an 'empty nest'. Perhaps the pervasive myths of the empty nest, coupled with normative constructions of what it means to be a 'good mother', are also reflected in Lyn's comments that "you're supposed to feel unhappy when your children leave home."

Despite such normative assumptions, many of the mothers in this research who were experiencing an 'empty nest' were not only enjoying their freedom, but also recognised and welcomed this period as a new and potentially exciting stage in their own lives. This notion of a new found freedom is summed up by Gillian, whose second child had recently moved out of home:

> I'm looking forward to this, 'cause it's quite exciting, 'cause I can choose to do what it is *I* want to do now. And you haven't got that consideration of... I mean, you still consider others, you consider your family, but it's like being free again [laughs]. (Gillian)

The initial period following children's departure can be characterised as a transitional phase, during which family members readjust to new interpersonal and relational dynamics. This transitional process is summed up by Diane, a 51 year old secondary school teacher, whose last child recently left home:

> *You mentioned at the beginning of the interview that you could see that you were going to go through a lot of changes with [younger daughter] moving out? What did you mean by that?*

> I guess because she's been the last one at home, and she's been much more intense about her study, that her being at home has impacted a lot on the sorts of things that I might do at home. Yeah, in fact, I said to my husband, "You know, now I won't care if

I make a noise doing the cupboards or decide to do some painting in the evening or whatever", but when she was at home, if she was in the study studying, if we got involved with, oh... "I better not do that, 'cause it will distract her, or it will annoy her"....and she's the sort of kid that when she stresses out everybody knows about [it], so you know when she's in a bad mood, and you know if she's got exams, 'cause the whole family, there's an atmosphere. You sort of walk in go, "Oh, alright, ok"....And it was only when she actually went last week that I suddenly realised just how different it was going to make things. And mostly I like that idea [laughs], but there's this part of me that sort of feels a bit....And I'm thinking, this is my own daughter, but the relationship, it's just changed. (Diane)

Diane's comments also hint at changes in relational dynamics during this process, as parents adjust to living together as a couple for the first time in many years, and mothers and children negotiate new sets of 'relationship rules' as independent adults As Gillian noted, her daughter's departure required that she and her husband "work through that [couple] relationship again." Similarly, the notion of redefining relationships with young adult children, and particularly daughters, is a common theme among the 'empty nesters' in this research project. As Lyn explained, "I guess it's become less mother/daughter, more friendship thing, which is really nice." Similarly, Diane described the adjustments required during the period immediately following her daughter moving out of home:

Like her [daughter] and her partner - I have to call him her partner now that they're living together I've been told - they came home for dinner, and it was really weird. It was like I was waiting for these guests to arrive. (Diane)

As discussed previously, there is some evidence that women actually anticipate these changes in their relationships with their young adult children, and thus are more easily able to make the transition to a relationship based on a more equitable footing, in contrast to fathers, who may not have seen the changes coming, and are as a consequence less prepared to make the required adjustments (deVries et al., 2007, p. 14). Such a dynamic is implied in other comments Diane made about the impact of her daughter moving out of home:

She really has gone! This really is it. And her coming home with [partner] for dinner, and then 9.30 saying "Well we're going home now" [reinforced it]. And she'd had an argument with her father about something, and I didn't buy into it. But I wanted to say something, and I'm thinking, no, she's an adult, she's got to deal with her father differently. I mean, he's probably going through, well he hasn't really talked about it much, but I'm sure the reason [for the argument was], she was not going to do something he said she should do, and it actually wasn't anything to do with him, it was do with a new job she's been offered. And I'm thinking, well it is actually her decision; just leave her alone, for heaven's sake. Yeah, lots of changes, I guess. Some good, some not so good, but you have to accept them. (Diane)

Only 2 of the 17 women whose children had left home indicated their children's departure had precipitated feelings of distress that might represent classic responses to the 'empty nest'. However, as noted previously, it is important to place these women's experiences within the wider context of their social situation; to characterise their distress as simply a response to their children's

departure ignores the complexity of these women's lives, and risks casting them as one-dimensional caricatures. For Gillian, her last child's departure rekindled emotions that had been long buried:

How did you feel when [younger daughter] moved out?

Oh well, that was huge....Oh my word. I suffered....I can remember going with her, with all her belongings, and going and finding the apartment and everything, and it wasn't until it came to leaving her there, and me going in the taxi to the airport, I was so choked up. I can feel it now....so choked up. And I couldn't work out where that came from. Because I'd encouraged, you know. I think what it was, was maybe my own personal fears coming to the surface. I think that's what it is. It's your own... I think because I'd been left, when I was 11, when my parents separated, I can remember being on my own and being miserable, and I think that's probably....having to leave her there, I think it brought back feelings that I had when my mother left me. Are you with me? (Gillian)

As Gillian's comments suggest, her last daughter's departure rekindled deeply buried feelings about her own mother's 'abandonment' of her as a girl. Such a dynamic has been noted in previous research, which has found that women's midlife years can "revive unresolved and unsettled issues of adolescence" (Scarf, cited in Mercer et al., 1989, p. 80). On the other hand, Berenice's reaction to her son's departure seems to reflect more contemporary problems. For Berenice the desire to protect her emotionally vulnerable son overshadows the tension that exists between her son and his stepfather:

[Younger son] has had a lot of issues, mainly because of step-father. That's why the kids moved out, because of issues with the step-father. They just don't get on with him, and a lot of emotional issues, so that when my son moved out of home, I was so worried about how he was going to cope, and then that caused arguments between us [Berenice and husband] because you know, he was so glad that they were gone, and I was so worried about him....and he [younger son] came back unwillingly. Sort of stayed for a little while, went to TAFE, left home, moved out for probably six months, and now he's back again, although I know he doesn't like being back here. But I'm happier, I feel happier knowing I can keep an eye on him. (Berenice)

Berenice's feelings towards her son's departure are also complicated by her reliance on her sons for emotional support and companionship. Her relationship with her second husband has not been easy, and she acknowledges that this has led her to 'cling' to her children:

When you said the empty nest, is it more for you just concern for your son's welfare, rather than you feel that you just don't want him to go full stop?

Oh, I love them being home. It's probably because our relationship [Berenice and second husband] has been very rocky that I probably cling to them [children] a little bit. That's why I enjoy having them around. They probably keep me sane, in a way, yeah. So I probably cling to them more than I should for company, I guess, sometimes, but for more of a balance. (Berenice)

Thus for Berenice, concerns about her son moving out are not so much related to her fear of losing her identity as a mother, but are instead a complex mix of feelings reflecting the very tense family dynamics. Even though having her son at home "leads to no end of arguments", she seems willing to accept this conflict in order to have her son close by.

When looked at in this light, it would appear that both Berenice's and Gillian's distress at their children's departure says more about other unresolved issues in their lives, than as offering evidence of their inability to adjust to the role changes associated with the 'empty nest'. As is evident, the classic 'empty nest syndrome' does little justice in describing the mix of emotions women feel as their children leave home. While this transitional period is most often welcomed with open arms, and sometimes even encouraged wholeheartedly, there is no doubt that some women find their children's departure an emotionally challenging process. Nevertheless, for the overwhelming majority, the positive benefits vastly outweigh any temporary distress or adjustment.

Of course, it should be noted here that discussions on the impact of the 'empty nest' fail to take into account midlife developmental paths for those women who for whatever reason have not had children. This issue is of growing significance to any study of midlife women, given that an increasing proportion of women are choosing to remain childless. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated in 2000 that "about a quarter of women in their reproductive years are likely never to have children"[20] (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002), a trend replicated in the United Kingdom and the United States (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). For such women, notions of the 'empty nest' are likely to be completely irrelevant, as they negotiate other transitional experiences more pertinent to their own personal situation during their midlife years. The continuing tendency in the psychological literature to focus on aspects of transition related to child-rearing roles means that, perhaps inevitably, "a silence falls upon those aspects of life unrelated to this nodal attribute" (Gergin, 1990, p. 476). The following sections examine other common transitional experiences during midlife.

3.4   The 'Empty Bed'

3.4.1   The 'empty bed': Psychological and financial implications

Just as children's departure can change family dynamics, so too can the midlife period trigger a reappraisal of intimate relationships in women's lives (Howell, 2001, p. 61; King et al., 2005, p. 25; Neugarten, 1979, p. 890; Sakraida, 2005, p. 82). Highlighting this midlife unrest, Lowenthal, Thurnher and Chiriboga's 1975 study found that "marital dissatisfaction was greatest among middle-aged women" (cited in, Mercer et al., 1989, p. 14). While it is possible that Lowenthal et al's research, conducted as it was during the height of second wave feminism, may have been influenced by women's growing socio-political awareness during that period, the evidence suggests midlife remains a time when relationships are reassessed. Trends in both Australia and the United States indicate an increasing number of women in midlife are either divorced, or going through the divorce process,

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[20] These are the latest statistics available through the ABS, as at November 2009.

with women more often initiating divorce than men[21] (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003, p. 57; Sakraida, 2005, p. 70). According to Australian statistics, the proportion of women aged 50 to 54 years whose divorce became final during 2006 in Australia rose from 4.9 per 1000 people in 1986, to 7.6 per 1000 people in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007a). The most recent ABS figures indicate that female applicants for divorce continue to outnumber male applicants, although the number of joint applications is rising, and may soon outnumber sole female applicants (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009a).

These statistics may in part reflect the reality of midlife as a time that draws together a range of stressful life-changing events. Such changes can challenge many adults' coping strategies, and "may spill over into the marital relationship" (Sakraida, 2005, p. 70). Midlife can also induce a period of introspection for some women, triggering a review of their marriage (Sakraida, 2005, p. 82). The personal growth and development that comes with the increased confidence and self-assertiveness (Apter, 1996, p. 559; Gergen, 2001, p. 118) experienced by many women during midlife will almost inevitably change the dynamics within an intimate relationship. "Bringing this [new found confidence and self-assertiveness] into a relationship can be easier than they had ever dreamed – or it can incur huge costs" (Apter, 1995, p. 240). It is often during this period, as Smith and Michalka note somewhat graphically, that "prior years of neglect, unspoken hurt and resentment, and lack of understanding or appreciation, become like a boil that bursts" (2006, p. 200). Howell's study of women's midlife development experiences reveals the decision-making processes that some women go through during this time:

> One described her evolved attitude toward her husband, saying that at age 50 she realized that she needed to accept him or leave him. She elected to accept him. Another participant indicated that she had decided to change her behavior: "I am just fed up with the BS. If I have got only 21 years left of life, I am not going to spend it the way I am doing it now." (Howell, 2001, p. 61)

Whether women view divorce as a welcome release from a difficult marriage, or as an unexpected and stressful event, it nevertheless represents a transitional process "that changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Sakraida, 2005, p. 70). In a longitudinal study conducted with female participants over a period of two years following the completion of formal divorce proceedings, Wilcox found that while the immediate period following the divorce is experienced as "intensely stressful", even two years after divorce women still experience significant levels of stress (1986, p. 130). Given that women in midlife may have invested many years in their

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[21] "As in previous years, more females (40.0%) than males (29.5%) lodged applications for divorce in 2006" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007a), although there is no statistical breakdown by age in this category. However, from 2006 to 2008 there has been a decrease in divorce rates for both males and females in the 45-59 and 50-54 age groups. This reflects similar decreases in divorce rates across all other age groups as well (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009a).

relationship, it is not surprising that these women, regardless of whether they have initiated the divorce or not, appear to suffer higher rates of distress and loneliness than younger divorced women (McDaniel & Coleman, 2003, p. 126; Sakraida, 2005, p. 70). As one participant in Sakraida's study confirmed, the process of divorce can be particularly distressing, even when they may have been the partner who initiated the divorce: "Severe, severe depression. Suicidal – wanted to do nothing but stay under a blanket and truly the only thing that saved me was my faith" (Lucy, cited in Sakraida, 2005, p. 79).

The divorce process inevitably results in further changes to women's lives. Adjusting to single parenthood, living alone, becoming economically independent, and managing on reduced finances are among the challenges newly divorced women must cope with (Sakraida, 2005, p. 82). As Rubin wrote some 20 years ago

> For midlife women, reckoning with divorce means, among other things, seeing friends go from rich to poor, from a life of relative comfort to one of deprivation....And the prospects that things will get much better financially are not good for most women who divorce after many years of marriage and financial dependency. (Rubin, 1979, p. 132)

Just as divorce for women in the 1970s generally led to a reduced financial position, even today divorce is still one of the key factors associated with women's reduced financial situation (Baker, 2001, p. 192; Headey & Warren, 2007, p. 68; Olsberg, 2005). Perhaps even more disturbingly, recent Australian research has found that divorce can have far-reaching consequences for an individual's financial security in retirement:

> An implication of the results of this report is that older Australians who have been divorced and are single in older age will have lower incomes and fewer assets than they would have had if they had remained married. Older divorced single Australians are much more likely to experience material hardships and report having a lower level of prosperity than the married and never-divorced. The divorced and single are more reliant on the public pension than those who do not divorce. (de Vaus, Gray, Qu, & Stanton, 2007)

The reduced economic situation for women after divorce has been found to contribute directly to increased levels of stress, and to negatively impact on women's "psychological wellbeing" (Stewart & Clarke, 1995, p. 165). An awareness of the financial risk associated with divorce, as well as a sense of the underlying stress that this entails is highlighted by the comments of one of the participants in this current research project. Five years after divorcing at 48, Vicki is still struggling with the economic consequences of having to divide up property and assets. Exacerbating her financial situation is the fact that her income had only ever been viewed as a supplement in her marriage, and now that she's divorced, her part-time business just manages to keep her going from week to week:

> We'd gone through some really tough times financially, and so there wasn't much happening in the way of money, and what little was left we just divided and, I mean, he was able to get back into the real estate market straight away, whereas I wasn't. I had spasmodic income, you know, still getting on my feet.

So he was able to purchase another house?

Yeah, yeah. He got sort of straight back into it again. And he had a pulling income, you know, he had that. I didn't have that. My work has always been part-time….So I didn't have full-time work, and yeah, I just had to get on my feet….And in the meantime, you know, the real estate market has gone through the roof, and I doubt… who would lend me money at my age? I mean, I've probably got what, 15 years working life left if I'm lucky, and a loan would probably take me 70 years to pay off. (Vicki)

Moreover, the knowledge that she has minimal superannuation or assets, or the "catch up time" needed to improve her financial situation before she retires, causes a great deal of concern to Vicki:

…my constant stress now is surviving financially….I have often wondered how many other women are caught up in similar circumstances. We often have nothing financial behind us in the way of superannuation or assets. How many of us got left behind in the real estate boom and now have no chance of buying our own home? I also realise that a lot of males are caught up in this too. Renting is new to me and I have no certainty as to the rental being available long term or that the rent will not skyrocket. We have a very small financial future and doubt we have the catch up time needed to change it with any impact. (Vicki)

Of course, it's important to note that not all the women in this study who have been through a divorce have experienced the same degree of difficulties as Vicki. Of the 17 women who have been divorced at least once, 10 continue to enjoy a good standard of living. In part, this may be due to the impact of remarriage on a woman's financial security, with Australian research indicating that remarriage for women is linked to an improvement in their financial situation, to levels almost equivalent to never-divorced women (de Vaus et al., 2007). However, 5 of these 10 women have not remarried, but have nevertheless managed to maintain a standard of living relatively equal to their pre-divorce situation. Not surprisingly perhaps, this current research suggests the key factor in whether women will be able to achieve and sustain a level of financial security is directly related to their pre and post-divorce employment situation. Those women who divorce, and do not subsequently remarry, appear able to maintain a relatively comfortable standard of living, *provided* that they had worked fulltime before their divorce, and continue to work fulltime following the divorce. Sherrie's story illustrates this dynamic; a 46 year old mother of three who has been happily married to her second husband for three years, Sherrie worked full-time throughout most of her first marriage, apart from a short period immediately following the separation, and was able to get back on her feet relatively quickly after she left her first husband. Sherrie gains a lot of satisfaction from the fact that she was able to purchase her own house as a single parent, which then enabled her to contribute financially towards her new relationship:

Yeah, everybody loves their little spot....My house ... was on 911 square metres ... it was the cheapest house. I felt proud of myself then. I felt that was a big achievement - managing to buy my own house for the first time.

As a single parent?

Yeah, and I got it for [a bargain]. It was a dump … but it had the potential to be fixed up. Good solid old house. And I sold that three years later for [a profit]. So that was alright. And I felt proud that I had so much [sic] assets to contribute to this house. (Sherrie)

However, for women who have been the primary care-giver for their children, there may be limited opportunities to work fulltime. Even well into midlife, some women may still have responsibility for dependent children, which may limit their opportunities to pursue fulltime work. For Naomi, who's been a single parent for 10 years, work options in the past have been limited to casual jobs or market stalls that have ended up costing more than she's made. With her youngest child only just entering high school, Naomi is now keen to find more permanent work, but needs to find work that will fit in with school hours and allow her to have school holidays off. This is driven not only by concerns Naomi has for the safety and security of her children, but also by her desire to spend time with them:

And a lot is said about the kids on the street graffitiing, and you know, at a loose end, probably because the parents aren't there, they're not at home with someone saying "Do you want a drink now?", or, "I'll get you a hot chocolate" [laughs]. Oh, I don't know, I like being around. (Naomi)

In addition, not all women have the capacity to return to fulltime work. As Vicki's story attests, women whose incomes during marriage have been viewed as supplementing their husband's income may not be in a good position to move to full time employment post divorce. Divorce may also coincide with or be triggered by other unforseen events, such as illness or injury, which may limit opportunities to work. For women in this situation, the options are to remain reliant on social security benefits, or continue to 'get by' on a limited income, with the added financial pressures and stress that this inevitably brings. Such a situation is exemplified in one particular participant's story. For Pippa, a 52 year old divorced mother of three teenage children, life took a dramatic turn six years ago when she was seriously injured in a car accident. Her marriage did not survive the stresses that accompany such a trauma and the day-to-day realities of living with someone with permanent injury, and she now lives alone, supporting herself on a disability pension. Neither bitter nor resentful, Pippa looks forward to her future with optimism, and works hard to maintain a relationship with her children, who now reside with her husband. But life in the six years since the accident has not been easy, and Pippa is very mindful of her limited income. During her interview, she referred several times to the need to be disciplined in keeping her expenses down. The following discussion relates to her choice of Internet service provider:

I didn't actually know that you could do prepaid [prior to Pippa getting access to the Internet at home], and all that business, which I have done, all along now, 'cause now I know what I'm up for, with prepaid. And then when I moved ... I was able to go with a

service provider, which is great. So I picked a very inexpensive one ... and it's been great for me, 'cause it's low cost, and it's slower.

Is it broadband?

Not yet, no, we haven't got broadband yet...It's a cost factor. The budget - I have to stay within the budget. (Pippa)

As the experiences of these three women have demonstrated, divorce can have very different financial outcomes for women in midlife and beyond. For some, such as Vicki, the struggle to maintain their head above water is a source of constant stress, as is the worry about their financial wellbeing in their retirement years. However, for women such as Sherrie who have managed to continue working full-time, the outlook is more positive.

3.4.2   The 'empty bed': Implications for social support networks

Another issue that has the potential to increase stress during and after a relationship breaks down is the impact the breakdown may have on an individual's social support network. As Bohannan noted almost 40 years ago, individuals involved in relationship breakdowns may be said to experience a "community divorce", whereby ties with friends and community are inevitably, and perhaps irrevocably, altered (cited in Wilcox, 1986, p. 116). Stewart and Clarke's research with separated women found "that many pre-divorce relationships are quickly lost, or gradually decline for various reasons" (1995, p. 168). Support networks may fracture as friends and family align themselves with husband or wife, mother or father (McDaniel & Coleman, 2003, p. 119; Stewart & Clarke, p. 168). This is particularly the case where a couple's friendship networks reflect the husband's social and professional connections (Wilcox, 1986, p. 117). As one of the women in McDaniel and Coleman's study indicated, during her marriage she and her husband had tended to associate mostly with people her husband liked, and with whom he shared common professional interests. Consequently, when their marriage dissolved, "Carole lost most of the friends she shared with her husband. She is no longer invited to the parties she used to attend and has lost contact with the social network she had prior to the divorce" (McDaniel & Coleman, 2003, p. 119). Similar dynamics are reflected in one of my research participant's stories. As Hilary explained, her divorce not only entailed major changes in her personal life, but also involved a fundamental shift in her social networks as well:

So the friends that we had jointly actually were mostly his friends, because he is a very strong character, and the friends were... the bunch of guys were the friends, you know, it was not the females. Where the females are friends, you would stay friends, but all our best friends, like the four guys and four families, and it's the guys who are the main friends, so we did all guy stuff....So then one family who I think I would have been close to the wife, they got transferred overseas, so, two families are living overseas now. So having to like make new friends.

So the separation involved not only separating from your husband, but separating from that network of friends, that social network?

Mmm, that's right. And the ones I did end up seeing were still the girlfriends I had who he never really liked [laughs]. All three of them that I did keep seeing, which is why we never did anything with them, because he didn't like them, and we only went out with the people he liked. (Hilary)

Even where a couple's friends reflect a combination of both partners' interests, there is no guarantee that friendships will be unaffected by the divorce process (Rubin, 1979, p. 137), even if only in the short-term (Wilcox, 1986, p. 117). Vicki has found that many of the friendships she had during her marriage have fallen by the wayside since her divorce. Vicki partly attributes this to having to relocate out of the area after the divorce, but she also feels that sometimes it becomes too 'awkward' for all concerned:

I don't know, I seem to have lost a few friends along the way, during different processes that have been going on....Yeah, they come and go, yeah....But also, the marriage, you know, the long term marriage, people, lots of people... I don't think I've got any friends left from our friends out of that relationship.

Why do you think that is?

I don't know. People just, I moved away from [them]....But yes, certainly you lose a lot of friends when you split up from a long term relationship. You lose a lot of friends along the wayside, because they don't know what to say. You don't know what to say to them, and it's just easier just to [drift apart]....I mean we still have contact, rare contact, but not that same sort of friendship you used to have with people, yeah. (Vicki)

As a result, the networks of social support which women would normally rely on as they adjust to changing circumstances may not be as readily available when they are most needed. Stewart and Clarke's study of the role of social support in alleviating stress following divorce found that "a higher self-concept and a greater sense of wellbeing was found in women whose social network had changed little" (1995, p. 168). Perhaps not surprisingly, research suggests newly-single women actively work on "strengthening old relationships and developing new ones....more than half ... [develop] closer friendships than they had prior to divorce" (Hayes and Anderson, cited in McDaniel & Coleman, 2003, p. 119).

3.5   The Impact of the Ageing and Death of Parents

When considering key transitional changes in the midlife years, it is apparent that particular experiences that in the past have been seen as pivotal markers, such as menopause and the empty nest, are not necessarily identified by women themselves as being highly significant when considered over the entire life span. As the earlier sections in this chapter illustrate, the majority of the women interviewed do not experience either menopause or the departure of their children as emotional watersheds in their lives. Moreover, transitional markers such as the empty nest are not an automatic part of the midlife experience for all women. Less than half the women in this research project could be described as empty nesters. Seven still have all their children living at home, with little prospect in

the near future of any moving out. Moreover, two of these women still have children in primary school; clearly for them, issues related to the empty nest are irrelevant at the present time. Not surprisingly, empty nest issues are also of little significance to the four women in this sample who are not mothers, although it may be the case for some non-mothers that this period in their lives evokes feelings of regret or pain at their childlessness.[22] Thus, transitional experiences related to the empty nest are by no means universal for all women during their midlife years. It is far more probable, however, that during this midlife period most women *will* experience the ageing and death of one or both of their parents (Noack & Buhl, 2004, p. 54; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 184); an event that can have a profound effect on women's lives (R. Leonard & Burns, 2006, p. 35; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 184). Indeed, there is strong evidence that the ageing and death of parents can be particularly traumatic (Umberson & Chen, cited in Noack & Buhl, 2004, p. 54), and a significant life event for many women (R. Leonard & Burns, 2006, p. 31; Mercer et al., 1989, p. 164; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 184; Waskel & Phelps, 1995, p. 1212). It may well be that it is in midlife that women "experience bereavement for the first time", and must deal with feelings of grief and loss just as they are also managing all the other transitions this period can bring (Hunter & Coope, 1993, p. 20). The death of a parent can also represent a generational changeover, reminding the next generation of the passage of time. Such is the case for Pat, whose father had recently died: "Like, you look at your parents and what's happening to them at the moment, and think, oh, we're next [laughs]. How quick the time goes, you know?"

For Corinne, a 45 year old participant in this current research project, the death of her father after a long and difficult illness left her feeling emotionally drained, and somewhat perturbed that grief has no culturally sanctioned outlet in western society:

> It's just incredible I reckon that there's no gnashing of teeth or wailing or anything. I mean, I'm just horrified really [laughter]. After having gone through it....And hearing people say, "Oh she's doing really well." Which meant I wasn't publicly crying and that sort of thing. (Corinne)

While the life expectancy for both men and women has increased markedly over the last century, so too have women's responsibilities for caring for ageing parents (Baker, 2001, p. 239). Both Australian and international research indicates that overwhelmingly it is women who carry the burden of caring for their elderly and frail parents (Apter, 1995, p. 294; Baker, 2001, p. 239; Cahill, 1999; King et al., 2005, p. 25; R. Leonard & Burns, 2006, p. 35; Millward, 1998, p. 21; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 188; Poole, 2009, p. 320). Although the classic 1980s Australian television comedy Mother and Son depicted the hapless Arthur trying his best to care for his ageing mother, in reality this burden would most likely have fallen to his sister-in-law, Liz. Whether women are

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[22] This issue was not raised by any of the non-mothers in this research, and is outside the scope of this research project.

motivated to provide care out of a sense of duty, guilt or obligation, or a genuine desire to help their parents, there is no doubt that care-giving can be physically and emotionally challenging for all parties. As King, Hunter and Harris note, the psychological challenges can be as daunting for both parents and children as are the physical and practical difficulties: "the elderly often feel a loss of control, and the midlife woman may feel a loss of parents as role models and as a strong, dependable part of her life" (2005, pp. 25-26). For women, this is perhaps most poignantly manifested in the changing nature of their relationship with their mother, particularly where the mother suffers from dementia. Where once a woman may have confided in her mother, this may no longer be possible. Joy, a 49 year old woman, alludes to this when asked whether she confides in her mother: "Not my Mum. My Mum's really ... she can't remember from one day to the next at the moment. She's got dementia."

The concept of the "sandwich generation" has been proposed to describe the phenomenon of midlife women who find themselves caring for their ageing parents whilst also responsible for their own dependent children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008b, p. 65; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 183). Thus, these women find themselves sandwiched between two generations (Green, 2002, p. 216; Millward, 1998, p. 21; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 183; Stull, Bowman, & Smerglia, 1994, p. 319). As Green describes this situation

> As the thirty-something first-time mothers give birth to their firstborn children, they find that their own mothers and fathers ... are now sixty-something. The stage is set for more and more women to be juggling school and after-school care for the ten-year-old, and holding the reins of social reality for a seventy-something parent. (Green, 2002, p. 216)

However, there is some evidence that the notion of the 'sandwich generation' is giving way to a situation where midlife women are more likely to be juggling the responsibilities involved in caring for ageing parents, whilst at the same time coping with the demands of fulltime paid employment (Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 186; Poole, 2009, p. 320). Contributing to this phenomenon are longer life expectancies for both men and women, coupled with declining birth rates; these demographic changes mean that the period when ageing parents are likely to need the most care is not until they are very elderly[23] (Poole, 2009, p. 310), and by this stage their children's offspring are mostly older and therefore likely to be independent. The changing nature of midlife women's care-giving responsibilities is exemplified in Perrig-Chielo and Hopflinger's research in Switzerland, which demonstrates that the "double burden" of caring for ageing parents and dealing with fulltime employment is most intense for women aged 50-54 (2005, p. 186). From Perrig-Chiello and

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[23] While ageing parents usually don't need high levels of care until they are very elderly (85+) (Poole, 2009, p. 310), it's likely that their adult daughters will also be responsible for providing episodic and terminal care for their parents should they require it.

Hopflinger's perspective, this 'double burden' "is much more challenging than being 'sandwiched' between the youngest and the oldest generation" (p. 190).

While none of the women interviewed in this research project could be classified as the primary care-giver for their parents, many were nonetheless involved in helping their parents continue to live independently. A sense of obligation towards elderly parents came through quite strongly in the interviews, and manifested in several women expressing guilt at not making more of an effort to see their parents. Raelene's feelings of guilt at not being able to see her mother as often as she feels she should are to some extent assuaged by the fact that her mother is not alone: "And I think because Dad is still there, you don't tend to worry as much. 'Cause they're doing their own thing." A different perspective is offered by Ellie, a 51 year old mother of three young adult children. Ellie's parents' "very fiery relationship" consumes much of Ellie's emotional energy. Moreover, expectations that Ellie will 'be there' for her mother compete with other demands on Ellie's time, and create a sense of frustration and resentment:

> And I have to be really mindful of my mother because she doesn't drive and she relies a lot on me. We don't get along overly great. A lot of the time she expects me to be there, but you know, during this time in my life I can't keep up with everybody. I'm trying to keep up with my own kids as well, plus do something for myself and keep my marriage ticking along as well, you know? (Ellie)

However, a sense of obligation or responsibility, whether happily accepted or grudgingly tolerated, is often accentuated when a parent, most often a mother, is left widowed, or as a result of divorce is living alone. For 52 year old Merryn, the demands of juggling fulltime work as a single parent, as well as managing her own chronic health condition, leave her with little time to spare. Her widowed mother's recent relinquishment of her driver's licence has placed further pressure on Merryn, and exacerbated feelings of guilt at not 'being there' enough for her mother:

> *What about your mother - do you see her a lot?*

> Mmm... no, probably not, not often enough. She's just actually given up her car, so that's one of the things that I'm hoping to do is try and take her shopping once a week. Great intentions, but it lasts for a couple of weeks, and then the last couple of weeks we've been really busy ... sometime this week we'll try and catch up. (Merryn)

The burden of care may be intensified even further when parents' health deteriorates, or when they develop debilitating conditions such as dementia. This situation is exemplified in my research by one woman's experiences of supervising the care of a mother with dementia, who had recently moved into a nursing home. As the only daughter of an only child, and with her brother living interstate, the responsibility for arranging her mother's move to the nursing home and selling her mother's home has fallen almost singlehandedly to Rita, a 53 year old divorced woman. As well as working full time, and managing the process of admitting her mother to the nursing home, Rita also assumed the responsibility for emptying and cleaning her mother's house:

> She's [mother] a hoarder, and she went into hospital ... and they sort of said she can't go home, so it was every night, and every weekend, for four or five months cleaning out her house, and trying to do the right thing by her, and letting her make decisions, realising how bad she wasn't coping. (Rita)

As Rita's experiences attest, the double burden of dealing with a parent with dementia while also working full time can be extremely challenging. Although Rita's mother is now in full time care, she is often called upon to take her mother to appointments with medical specialists. In this she is not alone; research indicates that even when women are not the primary care-givers for their parents, they most often carry the responsibility for supervising formal care arrangements (Baker, 2001, p. 239). In Rita's case, although volunteers can drive her mother to appointments, she feels an obligation to accompany her mother and ensure medical staff are fully informed about her mother's medical history, much of which her mother has now forgotten. But the apparently simple task of taking her mother to a doctor's appointment is itself challenging:

> I mean like last week I took Monday off. Took her to [hospital] for a six monthly pain clinic appointment... and that was one of the reasons for changing jobs - by the time you get back to work, half a day's gone. You pick her up at 8.30, and you're not back till lunch time, and then you're absolutely shattered, because she argues with you every step of the way.

> *So it's really emotionally draining?*

> Yeah, and it's physically... I've got back to work... you know, last year, one o'clock, two o'clock, absolutely exhausted, and um, yeah....So by the time you get to the hospital, you're exhausted....then you've got to park her. You put the wheelchair... I mean so it's physical, you've got to lift the wheelchair. I mean, she can walk, but not far. (Rita)

Rita represents a classic example of the juggling act many midlife women perform as they balance their care-giving responsibilities with workplace demands. For Rita, fitting in her mother's appointments during work hours inevitably means making up the time later: "but that's it, you're taking her out to the doctor's for, you know, half a day for a battery check-up for the pacemaker. It took five minutes but it's a half a day off work and then it's every night you've got to work back to make that time up" (Rita).

While several other women in this study were able to share the burden of caring for elderly parents with siblings or other family members, this was not an option for Rita. When asked if she had other siblings or relatives that could assist her, the enormity and isolation of Rita's situation became clear:

> I have a brother in Sydney. "Oh yes, I'll come across. I'll help you clean out the house." He barely even rings.

> *Is he younger than you?*

Yeah, he's five years younger than me. Hardly ever contacts her at all....He's a 'gunna'. Hasn't done a thing, yeah.

And there's nobody else in your family that could help?

No, no. Only the two of us....She was an only child, so there was nobody. (Rita)

Exacerbating Rita's situation is the emotional challenge of dealing with someone suffering dementia. As Stull, Bowman and Smerglia note, the unpredictable and disruptive behaviour displayed by many sufferers of dementia inevitably compound care-givers' emotional and physical stresses (1994, p. 323). As the following comment suggests, managing someone with this illness requires a great deal of patience and an ability to differentiate between the person and the illness:

> And then when I took her to the ultrasound....and we were driving, and I said this is the street down to my place, does it look familiar? "It's so long since I've been there" [her mother's comment said with sarcasm]. She's as quick as the... [laughs]. And I'm not that quick, and I'm thinking, ok, you know. And then I thought, what? Oh, strike a light! And that's where I guess it's hard. 'Cause when you think rationally, ok, it's the dementia. When you think emotionally, ok, some of the layers are coming off, and her true feelings are coming out [laughs]. (Rita)

As Rita's comments suggest, not only can dementia 'rob' a woman of a loving parent, and perhaps a source of support that has been a constant in their lives, but adult children must also deal with personality changes that often accompany dementia:

> Just the last couple of months you can really see it [dementia] taking a hold. Yeah, so it's been a fairly trying time, and understanding how the dementia's going, and the forms it takes, and the things it does to her mind, and the things that she does in response to it. Being the worst daughter in the world [laughs] and all that involves....Really, last year I didn't like the person I was becoming. And work was really pressured as well, but I found myself just going on with the frustration, not necessarily seeing the funny side of it but just the anger … you know, I felt that … and even now I can talk about it and laugh about it, but catch me in a quiet time and I've got to deal with that anger. (Rita)

However, the changes resulting from dementia shouldn't be seen as universally negative. Indeed, as Corinne's experiences indicate, there may be situations where dementia can actually facilitate an enriched connection between parent and daughter, as entrenched negative patterns of interaction give way, and a more innocent connection develops:

> She [Mother] can still speak a little bit and I can see her expression is very much there still, you know? So, we can … I mean we had a pretty typical mother/daughter relationship. Quite intense and quite conflicted at times. But since she's developed this disease ... she's dropped a lot of her concerns and neurosis (laughter). She's just a delight!

> *Yeah?*

> Yeah. So I feel close … really close to her actually. (Corinne)

As these women's experiences suggest, just as divorce can have a profound impact on midlife

women, so too do the ageing and death of parents present as major transition points in many women's lives. The degree to which women assist their ageing parents to live independently, and manage the care for their parents when their health deteriorates, and the challenges these care-giving responsibilities present to the women, are clearly highlighted in the participants' stories. However, while Rita's and Corinne's experiences of the ageing and loss of much loved parents are emotionally distressing, and undoubtedly challenge their ability to cope, they are not entirely unexpected. Reflective of other age-normative transitions, such as getting married, starting a family, launching young adult children, and retirement, they normally occur within specific age periods (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 4). While a woman may not particularly welcome menopause, and is likely to view the increasing frailty of her parents with sadness, to some extent she is able to anticipate these changes in her life, and start making preparations for the future. Indeed, as noted earlier, there is evidence that women are more easily able to make the transition to the 'empty nest' precisely because they *have* anticipated how their children's departure will impact on their life (deVries et al., 2007, p. 14). Likewise, several women in my study discussed measures they were taking to prepare themselves physically for menopause, such as switching to soy-based products and increasing their levels of exercise. While such age-normative transitions may be experienced as unsettling and at time distressing, they are nevertheless considered to be critical channels through which adult development occurs (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 2). However, unexpected or unanticipated changes present different challenges to individuals; this is considered in more detail in the following section.

3.6 Unexpected Transitions

Research suggests that non-normative life events, which occur "out of the expected chronological age sequence" (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 5), represent a significant challenge to individual's coping mechanisms (Oatley, 1990, p. 78). Such events, which include "accidents, acute or chronic illness, and untimely deaths....are often precipitous, undesired, and provide little time for the anticipatory work to be accomplished in preparing for and adapting to new roles" (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 5). As Oatley notes, sudden transitions such as the onset of acute illness or the unexpected loss of a partner can have devastating consequences:

> Habits and roles enable us to be effective in controlling a limited aspect of our world, and to sustain a self in relation to other people with whom we interact. But if habits and the familiar are denied us, or if we are cast suddenly into an unfamiliar role, then it can be as if the world crumbles. Practised actions and stored knowledge become useless. (Oatley, 1990, p. 78)

Such 'precipitous' and unanticipated events have occurred to a number of women in my research; Chris, Paula, Lyn and Katrina all experienced major unexpected health crises several years before their interviews which have had a profound impact on their lives, while Pippa, Anna and Yvonne's health crises, although occurring some years earlier, continue to have major consequences

for their everyday lives. For Vicki, the combination of an unwelcome divorce, followed by an emotionally abusive relationship, has left her struggling to cope both financially and emotionally. However, while these events weren't anticipated, they have nonetheless precipitated positive psychological growth for some of the women. For others, however, the lack of control associated with such undesirable and unexpected transitions can create major psychosocial difficulties. By way of illustration, 49 year old Anna has a debilitating back condition as a result of a workplace accident that has resulted in her suffering chronic pain and depression for much of the past decade. In reflecting on the period immediately following the injury to her back, Anna commented

> It was very difficult, and I wasn't ready for a change. It actually came at a time when I thought that, well my youngest child was ten, one was at uni, one was about to start uni, and I thought, well now I can maybe think about what I would like to do, and that was, I had thought that I would do a [professional course]. And um, yeah, you know, restart my career, which I'd put on hold with my kids. So it was quite difficult. So I suppose, what I feel at the moment is entirely coloured by my experiences with my back, and ongoing chronic pain. (Anna)

Anna's comments reinforce that age-normative transitions such as the 'empty nest' are not only anticipated, but may in fact be actively prepared for. Certainly Anna's comments imply that she had begun to look ahead to a time when all three of her children would be independent, and so was making preparations to 'restart' her career. The sudden and unanticipated changes in her life as a result of the injury not only led to an immediate loss of her role as a professional in a valued and rewarding career, but have also severely restricted her opportunity to move into related areas. As the following comments by Oatley indicate, such role loss can be particularly damaging:

> Among the most serious kinds of transitions are losses of roles. When such losses occur, and alternative roles are not available to allow people a sense of worthwhile self, such events can have the most serious consequences. A whole structure of practised interaction can become obsolete, while new roles have not been constructed, or perhaps even conceived. In this interregnum not only do symptoms of depression occur, in addition to already tumultuous emotions, but at these moments we can have a sudden sense of how fragile is the floor of reality upon which at other times our sense of self is supported without concern. (Oatley, 1990, p. 80)

Moreover, as evidence for a link between sudden role loss and clinical depression, Oatley cites a study by Brown and Harris which found that

> Among women, between 80 and 90 per cent of depressive breakdowns discovered in samples randomly selected from voters' lists in London, and more than 60 per cent of depressive episodes occurring to people who were psychiatric patients, were preceded by a severely threatening event or difficulty of this kind [role transition]. (cited in Oatley, 1990, p. 79)

Thus, while Anna credits her chronic depressive illness to the pain she experiences on a daily basis, it is likely to have also been exacerbated by the sudden and unexpected role loss associated with

her injury, which has prevented her from returning to a job that she enjoyed, and from pursuing her desired future career path.

3.7   Conclusion

This chapter has considered in detail the transitions commonly experienced during the midlife years, by outlining key theoretical, clinical, cultural and empirical accounts of transitions such as menopause and the 'empty nest'. These accounts have then been compared and contrasted with key findings from this current research project. As demonstrated, the majority of the women are taking these changes in their lives 'in their stride'; indeed, there is a sense that at least some of the women are relishing the new found freedom which some of these changes bring. Sadly, however, a small minority of the women I interviewed are struggling to cope with physical or emotional difficulties in their lives. For these women, their difficulties appear to be largely unrelated to the normative transitions that most women will pass through during their midlife years. Instead, issues related to unexpected or sudden role loss or changes seem to be the main contributing factor in their physical and/or emotional distress. This research suggests that the most important factor determining how well these women are able to manage either the expected transitions of midlife, or the unanticipated and sudden transitions such as that experienced by Anna, appears to be the presence of social support in their lives. As Silverman points out, "persons in transition need to learn from others who have experienced a similar transition and to be linked with information and resources from those who are knowledgeable about their new experiences in their particular situation" (cited in, Mercer et al., 1989, p. 3). The following chapter takes up this issue by considering in detail findings from this research project which relate to transition and social support, with a particular focus on the key networks of social support in the research participants' lives.

Chapter Four

Women's Networks of Social Support

4.1   Introduction

Arguably, the life-changing events women face in midlife can be as dramatic, if not more so, than at any other time. According to Gilligan, "the events of mid-life – the menopause and changes in family and work – can alter a woman's activities of care in ways that affect her sense of herself" (1982, p. 171). Given that change has been identified as a "one of the most significant sources of stress" (Westen et al., 2006, p. 577), it is not unreasonable to suggest that the midlife period may present difficulties to many women. Role changes, the loss of one's parents, and adjusting to physiological changes during menopause may initially create a sense of frustration, loss of control and anxiety (Viney, 1980, p. 158). Indeed, as noted in Section 3.6 of Chapter Three, the sudden termination or disruption to an important role can incur great psychological damage (Brown & Harris, cited in Oatley, 1990, p. 78); the key factor in ameliorating stress caused by such role changes has been identified by many commentators as being social support (Brown & Harris, cited in Oatley, 1990, p. 79).

Social support has been defined as "the companionship and practical, informational and esteem support which the individual derives from interaction with members of his or her 'social network', including friends, colleagues, acquaintances and family members" (Cooper, Arber, Fee & Gin, cited in Nettleton et al., 2002, p. 178). Put more simply, social support can be constructed "as the woman's [or man's] belief that she [he] is valued, loved, and an integral part of a social relationship" (Shearer, 2006, para. Background). The extensive body of research devoted to this topic suggests there are multiple dimensions to social support. Early research conducted by Cassel (1976) and Cobb (1976) drew attention to "the role of social relationships in moderating or buffering potentially deleterious health effects of psychosocial stress or other health hazards" (cited in House & Landis, 2003, p. 219). Subsequent research suggests this buffering effect is particularly important at critical moments in individuals' lives (Westen et al., 2006, p. 586). As Caplan notes, during times of stress "significant others help the individual mobilize his psychological resources and master his emotional burdens; they share his tasks; and they provide him with extra supplies of money, materials, tools, skills, and cognitive guidance to improve his handling of his situation" (cited in Hirsch, 1980, p. 160).

Social support has also been identified as acting on a macro level as a "continuously positive force that makes the person less susceptible to stress" (Westen et al., 2006, p. 586). Such support enhances an individual's ability to adapt to changing circumstances and develop new coping strategies

(Hirsch, 1980, p. 168). On an emotional level, the presence of social support, or even the perceived presence (Wilcox, 1986, p. 131), "may be protective in providing an indication of being loved and valued" (Stewart & Clarke, 1995, p. 164). In this situation, the benefits for the recipient may be threefold. Firstly, recognition of being loved and cared for can enhance an individual's self-esteem at a time when their self-confidence may be fragile. This in turn can enhance their self-belief and coping abilities, increasing the likelihood that they will successfully adapt to changes in their life. To illustrate the benefits of social support in this context, Stewart and Clarke's study found that enhancements to self-esteem that result from perceptions of social support are particularly important in "ameliorating the effects of daily hassles ... following separation/divorce" (1995, p. 168). Lastly, just knowing that others care and are willing to help may facilitate "a different way of appraising stressful events" and thus create an awareness of alternative strategies for managing such events (Stewart & Clarke, p. 164).

Numerous studies have identified the crucial role social support plays in helping individuals cope with crises and life transitions (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, 2002, p. 399; Hirsch, 1980, p. 160; Hurdle, 2001; Stewart & Clarke, 1995, p. 164; Viney, 1980, p. 164; Westen et al., 2006, p. 586). As the previous chapter has indicated, midlife can involve multiple changes in a woman's life; it's likely therefore that social support is a particularly significant element in women's lives during this period (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, p. 398).

4.2   Sources of Social Support for Women

Given the central role relationships play in women's psychological development[24], it is perhaps not surprising that networks of social support "appear to be particularly important to women" (Hurdle, 2001). As Hurdle suggests, "the influence of social relationships may assume a more primary role for girls and women and influence the decisions they make and their feelings about health issues" (Hurdle, 2001, para. Social support and women's health). According to a study examining the association between role-strain and depression in women, the *perception* of the ready availability of social support is integral to women's ongoing emotional wellbeing:

> Social support appears to have a major direct effect on women's psychological well-being. Irrespective of the level of strain in marital and employment roles, or the absence of such roles, the perception of adequate support is beneficial in and of itself, and its absence is a source of distress. Thus, close interpersonal relationships are not merely coping resources brought into play to combat persistent problems encountered in marital and employment roles. Instead, they play a major role in the maintenance of psychological well-being. (Aneshensel, 1986, p. 112)

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[24] A detailed discussion on the importance of relationships in women's lives is included in the following chapter, in Section 5.2.

Historically, women's social support has been largely derived through kinship networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006, p. 362). Research by Mercer, Nichols and Doyle into older women's sources of support during times of transition found that family members were more frequently relied upon than friends (1989). While the authors noted the "important influence" of friendships throughout women's lives, their interviews with women aged over 60 years led them to conclude that "friendships did not appear to play a strong role in their ongoing adaptation to transitions" (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 129). For this cohort of women, husbands, mothers and children were more likely to be identified as key sources of support during transitional periods (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 131).

4.2.1 Social Support within Family Networks: The Mother-Daughter Connection[25]

An early description of the link between women's social support networks and patterns of kinship is discussed in an ethnographic study conducted in East London in the 1950s (Young & Willmott, 1962). Young and Wilmott's seminal study highlighted the close intergenerational ties fostered through frequent face-to-face contact, particularly between mothers and adult daughters, and the role this contact played in facilitating the exchange of social support between generations. The continuous nature of this connection is revealed by one participant's comment: "Mum's always popping in here – twelve times a day I should say" (Young & Willmott, p. 47). More recent studies have made similar observations on the enduring and continuous nature of this unique connection. Both Moyal in Australia (1992, p. 55), and Rakow in the United States (1992, p. 44), found family social support networks most clearly articulated through ongoing, frequent communication between mothers and adult daughters. Reflecting the strength of the mother-daughter tie, Moyal's research revealed that "the last call made ... by many women was 'to my daughter' or 'to Mum'" (p. 57). The continuously enacted nature of the mother-daughter relationship is further highlighted in Lye's meta-analysis which found that contact between mothers and daughters occurs more frequently "than fathers and sons or mixed gender dyads" (1996, p. 88).

Indeed, the strength of the mother-daughter bond has been the subject of much discussion in the social sciences, with Fisher observing that "sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists have described a special closeness between mothers and daughters over all stages of the life course, from the infancy of the daughters to the old age of the mothers" (1991, p. 237). Analysis of research over the last 50 years[26] has consistently demonstrated that the mother-daughter relationship across the life

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[25] Parts of sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 have been drawn from a refereed paper presented at the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) Conference in Wellington, New Zealand, in July 2008 (Dare, 2008).

[26] For the most part this research has been conducted among white, middle-class sample groups. There have been some exceptions to this pattern, including ethnographic research by Young and Willmott (1962), which focused on working class families in East London in the 1950s, as well as cross-cultural studies by Neisser (cited in, C. J. Boyd, 1989, p. 298).

cycle is experienced by both parties as stronger than other comparable family relationships, such as the father-daughter dyad (C. J. Boyd, 1989, p. 299; L. R. Fischer, 1991, p. 240; Frank, Avery, & Laman, 1988, p. 736; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998, p. 927; Lye, 1996, p. 88; Proulx & Helms, 2008, p. 238; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, p. 278; Young & Willmott, 1962, p. 45). Indeed, in Rossi and Rossi's life-course analysis of families across three generations, mothers and daughters across all cohorts rated the mother-daughter relationship as being the most intimate (1990, p. 278).

This is not to suggest that the mother-daughter relationship is free from tensions and difficulties. Certainly, evidence suggests adolescent girls and young adult women tend to report higher levels of conflict than their mothers (C. J. Boyd, 1989, p. 298; L. M. Smith, Mullis, & Hill, 1995, p. 501). It is important to note, however, that the existence of conflict does not generally detract from daughters' overall level of satisfaction with their relationship with their mother (C. J. Boyd, 1989, p. 298), nor diminish the closeness of the relationship (C. J. Boyd, p. 299; Frank et al., 1988, p. 736; L. M. Smith et al., p. 496).

It should also be noted here that while this research has highlighted the enduring connections between mothers and daughters, the intention is not to diminish the importance of the bond between mothers and sons. Mothers of daughters *and* sons, both in this research project and in past research, exhibit a strong desire to maintain a close and loving bond with their adult children. Indeed, at least one of the women I interviewed noted that her brother telephones her elderly mother more often than she does. As Katrina explained, her brother doesn't have a computer, but "he really likes to have a chat. It's very hard to get my brother off the phone. He loves to chat." As we were discussing this, Katrina's teenage son came into the room and jokingly added that his uncle "calls every half hour. If he rings and asks to talk to you [referring to his mother], and you're not there, he'll start talking to me." Katrina added, "yes, he'll talk to whoever's available, about football", to which her son replied "yeah, it's always about footie." As such, the degree to which Katrina's brother's nightly calls to his mother demonstrate a particularly strong bond between mother and son, or whether they represent his desire to 'have a chat', is difficult to determine. Nevertheless, regardless of the factors motivating Katrina's brother's calls, the mere fact that he is calling his mother every night is likely to reinforce a sense of familiarity and connection between mother and son. Moreover, the regular phone calls provide an avenue through which both parties can give and receive love and support.

However, while acknowledging the strength of the mother-son bond, there is strong evidence to argue that the *nature* of the bond between a mother and daughter is unique. Not only do both mothers and daughters report a greater degree of intimacy and connection in this bond (Frank et al., 1988, p. 729; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998, p. 927; Proulx & Helms, 2008, p. 238; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, p. 278), but they also have more frequent contact (Frank et al., 1988, p. 729; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994, p. 58), and draw on each other for practical and emotional support more often than do mothers and sons (Lye, 1996, p. 88; L. M. Smith et al., 1995, p. 502). Research

also suggests that when adult children live some distance from the family home, relationships between both parents and daughters improve, while conversely the quality of relationships between mothers and sons has been show to decline (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998, p. 935). Kaufman and Uhlenberg speculate this may reflect the fact that "sons, in general, take less initiative in kin relationships" (p. 935), while women of both generations are socially conditioned to be 'kin-keepers'. Moreover, not only does research suggest sons are less likely to communicate regularly with parents, but evidence indicates families may expect more frequent contact and greater degrees of relatedness from adult daughters than they do from sons (Proulx & Helms, p. 238). Certainly, evidence from a recent Australian study confirms that parents believe their daughters rely more heavily on them for emotional support than do sons (Vassallo, Smart, & Price-Robertson, 2009, para. Differences between parents of young women and parents of young men). The uniqueness of the mother-daughter connection led Karen Fingerman to conclude that

> The strength of the mother/daughter bond distinguishes it from other social ties. Marital partners divorce when disparities arise, friendships dissolve when life situations change, and family members become estranged in the face of conflict. Few relationships endure with the strength of the mother/daughter tie throughout life.[27] (Fingerman, 2001, p. xv)

4.2.2 Social support networks and geographical proximity

As Young and Willmott's research over 50 years ago revealed, familiarity and a sense of shared purpose were fostered almost exclusively through frequent face-to-face communication, conducted within an intimately shared social world. Close physical proximity was associated both with frequency of contact with family members, and with the nature of women's social support networks (Young & Willmott, 1962, p. 48). Different generations lived in close proximity to each other, often in the same street or even next door to each other (Young & Willmott, p. 41). The subsequent relocation of extended family members to outer urban areas within the same city created significant barriers to maintaining a sense of connectedness (Young & Willmott, 1962, p. 134), as often family members had limited access to telephone services or readily available and affordable transport options (Young & Willmott, p. 136). Even for later generations, the cost of long distance telephone calls inhibited the frequency and length of contact, and thus limited opportunities to build mutual understanding and empathy between family members separated by distance (Rakow, 1992, p. 49; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, p. 372). For some critics, increased mobility and changing social patterns

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[27] To some extent my research supports Fingerman's comments here. Of the 40 participants I interviewed, 3 had been estranged from their fathers before their fathers passed away, while several more had either no contact or very minimal contact with 1 or more siblings. In contrast, all 33 of the women whose mothers were still alive were in regular contact with them, and in general expressed a good level of satisfaction in their relationship with their mother.

have negatively impacted on the traditional family, and by extension, the availability of traditional sources of support:

> Families are on their own. Family privacy, economic prosperity, and mobility patterns all separate parents and children from traditional sources of support and feedback. Isolation is contagious, we become estranged from each other and all families lose the social support of close and caring loved ones. (Garbarino & Abromowitz, cited in Tomison, 1999, para. So, generally how connected are we?)

The implication of Garbarino and Abromowitz's comments is that *meaningful* social support is predominantly provided by co-present family members; once families become scattered across the globe, family members' access to social support is inevitably lost. This assumption overlooks two important factors associated with the provision and availability of a supportive network. Firstly, even where family members are separated geographically by thousands of miles, evidence suggests it *is* possible to maintain an active family support network through the use of ICTs. The introduction of new modes of communication such as email, Internet-enabled telephone calls (VOIP and Skype technologies), and text messaging (SMS) can help to transcend geographic barriers which in the past may have separated family members (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006, p. 144; Boneva et al., 2001; Holloway & Green, 2004; Rakow & Navarro, 1993; Uy-Tioco, 2007, p. 256; Wilding, 2006, p. 138), and foster "a perception of intimate connectedness" within families who are dispersed across the globe (Wilding, p. 138). Moreover, the perceived convenience and affordability of new modes such as email (Boneva et al., p. 541; Matzko, 2002, p. 63) have been shown to increase both the quantity and quality of interaction (Wilding, p. 138), which in turn potentially leads to enhanced relationships (Lawton et al., 1994, p. 58), and improved health and wellbeing outcomes for family members, not only now but as it relates to the future provision of social support:

> Communication is essential for reproducing the social field in which family members ... feel sufficiently connected to enable them to call on other members of the network for support. It is also essential in order to feel a need to provide support. (Wilding, 2006, p. 138)

Indeed, even where finances are limited, the telephone is often viewed as a necessity in order to 'keep in touch'. As Young and Willmott's research revealed, once families moved to the new housing estate of 'Greenleigh', some twenty miles away from Bethnal Green, the telephone became a critical link between family members (1962, p. 159). As the authors note, "Greenleigh, though composed mainly of manual workers like Bethnal Green, has nearly seven times more telephones per head and, if our informants are any guide, at least one motive is to keep in touch with the kin left behind" (Young & Willmott, p. 159).

Secondly, it's also important to note that even where family members may live near each other, they may not necessarily be the primary source of support. My research provides mixed

evidence of the role families' play as sources of social support in women's lives. When I asked 46 year old Katrina whether she turned to her mother for support, she replied:

> Ah, not so much, actually. No, not really. I mean I do talk to mum about things, but we don't have that sort of really close relationship. Although I know I could, yeah. (Katrina)

Other women indicated a reluctance to burden their ageing parents – most often mothers – with their concerns, so that even where the women had a strong and loving relationship with their parent, they would be unlikely to view them as key sources of support during difficult times. This is particularly the case for Robyn, who has always had a very close connection with her mother. As Robyn explained, "Mum is the one person that takes me warts and all. She really does." However, during a difficult time in her marriage recently, Robyn was reluctant to lean too heavily on her mother, partly because her mother lives some distance from her, and also because she didn't want to worry her too much: "For me, I turn to Mum, but my Mum lives over in the Eastern States ... so it was very hard to lean on her too much, because I knew she was also very worried about where I was [emotionally]" (Robyn). Likewise, while Chris has a very close relationship with her younger sister, she is cautious about unduly worrying her:

> Yeah, I can talk to her, but I don't like to worry her with a lot of middle-age crisis sort of stuff. I tend not to, 'cause she worries about me. I know she worries about me, so I tend not to want to go there. (Chris)

As several other interviews in this research poignantly highlight, for some women, their mother's dementia has robbed them of a nurturing and supportive relationship. For others, the death of their mother inevitably breaks this unique bond. And there are some women who perhaps have never enjoyed the sort of supportive relationship with their mother that they may have liked. Such is the case for Vicki, who at the time the interview took place had not long left an abusive relationship. As the following comments suggest, not only is Vicki's mother unable or unwilling to provide the support her daughter needs, but in disclosing intimate thoughts and feelings to her mother, Vicki opens herself up to the potential for embarrassment and humiliation:

> *Were you able to talk to your Mum about things like that?*

> Easier to talk to the wall. Yeah, my Mum's gorgeous, don't get me wrong, but don't discuss anything too personal. No, my Mum doesn't want to know at all. Not at all. And um, it's funny 'cause ... I'll be on the end of the phone sobbing, and the next thing, she'll just start talking about the football or something. It's like, oh....You're on the end of the bloody phone sobbing your heart out, and all of a sudden the subject's changed [laughs], you've got to pull yourself together here... move on, yeah, "It was a great footy game Mum" [laughs].

> Yeah, anything personal and emotional, yeah, you just have to live with it. But still when you're devastated and you'd think, and you need someone to talk to, and your Mum just happens to be on the end of the line. I mean, my kids are on the end of the line constantly, in some disaster that's happened, and something pathetic usually, and

they think it's a big deal for them, you know. I listen to them, and let them cry, and you know, and have a chat about, you know, "How can we sort this out?" or whatever. Not my Mum, no. It's easier, as I said it's easier talking to the wall, than it is to my Mum. At least the wall you don't come away thinking, oh, God, I wish I hadn't opened my mouth about that, you know? Sometimes I come away from talking to Mum and think, I wish I hadn't brought that up, I feel embarrassed [laughs]. Now she knows, and she's just ignoring it. (Vicki)

It is important to note here Vicki's description of her Mum as "gorgeous", suggesting that in many other ways they enjoy an enjoyable mother-daughter relationship.[28] However, when it comes to emotional support, her mother is not a person that Vicki can turn to. At the same time, Vicki is acutely aware that her own young adult children expect *her* to be there for *them* when they need support and understanding. That she *is* there to provide support "constantly" to her own children reinforces the findings of a recent parallel study of parents and young adult children, which found that parents, and in particular mothers[29], continue to be major sources of both practical and emotional support for their young adult children (Vassallo et al., 2009, para. Emotional support). Indeed, this study by Vassallo, Smart and Price-Robertson found that parents actually underestimate the degree to which their children rely on them for emotional support and guidance: while "close to 70% of parents believed that their son or daughter counted on them to listen to them", an even greater percentage (85%-88%) of the "23-24 year olds agreed that they could count on their parents to listen to them, help them with problems, or advise them on other matters" (Vassallo et al., para. Emotional support).

4.2.3 *Marriage as a source of social support for women*

Just as there is an assumption in the literature that mothers are key sources of support for their adult daughters, so too is it often assumed that marriage or de facto relationships are mutually supportive (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009d). However, while some researchers have assumed that couple relationships provides both parties with the necessary level of social support, such that the need to look for support outside the marriage is minimal (Liebler & Sandefur, 2002, p. 367), a significant body of evidence indicates that even happily married women often rely more heavily upon female friends for emotional support than upon their husbands (Gurung, Taylor, & Seeman, 2003, p. 487; Rubin, 1985, p. 65; Vaux, 1985, p. 93). Indeed, Shere Hite's famous report from the late 1980s found that "87 per cent of married women and 95 per cent of single women reported that they had their deepest emotional relationship with another woman" (cited in Coates, 1996, p. 42). This research project strongly echoes these earlier findings. Although 25 of the 40 women interviewed were either

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[28] Here Vicki's comments support Karen Fingerman's (2001, p. xv) assertion that the mother-daughter relationship is the most durable of all human connections; Vicki's relationship with her mother continues, and is arguably an important part of both women's lives, *despite* the fact that Vicki's mother is unable to give her daughter the level of emotional support she desires.

[29] Of the 968 parents surveyed, 89% were mothers. The gender of the young adult children was more evenly split, with 52% female and 48% male children involved in the survey (Vassallo et al., 2009, para. The study).

married or in a relationship at the time of the interviews, only seven identified their partner as someone they would turn to if they were concerned about something, or needed to talk about something, and only two nominated their partner as their main source of support. One notable exception is 46 year old Chris, who had experienced a health crisis 18 months before the interview. At the time, Chris felt that her friends didn't recognise the ongoing emotional and physical trauma resulting from the health issue, and as a result she found herself turning more than ever to her husband. As Chris explained, "I felt that I relied heavily on my husband. He was sort of the 'be all and end all' during that time. He was it."

More commonly, where partners were identified as sources of support, they were more likely to be considered as one element of the women's overall social support networks, rather than as the primary source of support. This was the case even where the women indicated they had a very strong relationship with their partner. Such a situation is evident in Lyn's comments:

Who do you turn to for emotional support?

I guess my husband and my sister....And then I have various good friends....And I've got a friend who's the person I've been friends with for the longest, since I was a teenager. (Lyn)

Interviews revealed a fairly common perception that support offered by partners was often of a limited nature. This is illustrated in Pat's reflections:

If there's something on your mind, you're worried about something, who are you likely to turn to?

Oh, my husband or one of my brothers or sisters. Probably one of my sisters....I have got a couple of [female] friends too that I talk to.

Are there different things that you might talk about with your husband, than you would with your sisters or your friends?

Probably, yeah. I mean, deep conversations my husband's not really into. You know, like, the worries of the world and stuff like that. You can go to a certain level with him, and then it's like, ok. (Pat)

Certainly, empirical evidence suggests that while women still draw support from within the family, many are also turning to their non-kin networks for emotional support and companionship, even when family members may live close by (Davidson & Packard, 1981, p. 508; Moyal, 1992, p. 57). As one of Moyal's participants observed, "I'm more attentive to the needs of my women friends. Feminism has made us not feel ashamed of being close to women; we encourage and support each other" (1992, p. 59). Reflecting these aspects of women's networks, Gouldner and Strong contend that

"friendship may be making a bid for first place or rivaling first place as a provider of the intimacy and support needed by every woman at some period of her life" (cited in Coates, 1996, p. 42).[30] The following section explores women's friendships as key sources of social support in women's lives, by firstly examining recent research on the strength of family and friendship ties.

4.2.4 *Social support networks and women's friendships*

The concept of friendship is one element in the more abstract concept of *social capital*. Robert Putnam's classic study of social capital in the United States, <u>Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community</u>, defines social capital as "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). According to Fischer, Putnam's main contention is that "Americans in the 1950s ... were more socially connected than those who came after and those who came before" (C. S. Fischer, 2005, p. 155). In arriving at his conclusion, Putnam drew on a number of nationally representative and longitudinal surveys to measure changes in a range of behaviours, including church attendance, volunteering, voting, attending family dinners and picnics, and of course, playing league tenpin bowling. As Fischer notes, Putnam points to "lower church attendance, fewer family meals, [and] less frequent social entertaining" as measures of overall declining "sociality", at both the individual and group/society level (2005, p. 160). This apparent decline in community and social connections is also reported in a later study designed to identify Americans' 'core discussion networks'. Using a more recent version from 2004 of the nationally representative General Social Survey (GSS) on which Putnam based many of his conclusions, and contrasting these with the 1985 GSS results, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears found that in general, Americans' core discussion networks – those people an individual turns to if they need to discuss "important matters" – have shrunk over the last 20 years, with more people now turning to their spouse for support and advice, rather than seeking non-kin assistance (2006, p. 355). Thus, the authors note that

> The general image is one of an already densely connected, close, homogenous set of ties slowly closing in on itself, becoming smaller, more tightly interconnected, more

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[30] Several researchers caution against idealising women's friendships, and suggest this simplifies what can be very complex interpersonal relationships (Apter & Josselson, 1998; Side, 1997). As Apter and Josselson note, women's friendships can be fraught with tensions and conflict (1998, p. 77). Moreover, they contend that many of the insecurities and competitiveness that mark girls' friendships carry through into adulthood (p. 77). In a similar vein, Side highlights the voluntary and at times fragile nature of women's friendships, in comparison to family relationships. She concludes that women's friendships operate within fairly clearly defined and limited parameters, and are "not bound by the sense of duty and obligations that family are" (Side, 1997, p. 160). As Side's research participants indicated, there can be clear limits to the extent to which emotional and practical support is exchanged between women friends (p. 160). This issue is discussed again a little further on in this chapter.

focused on the very strong bonds of the nuclear family (spouses, partners and parents.[31]) (McPherson et al., 2006, p. 371)

The results in terms of women's social and community connections are somewhat more equivocal. Despite an overall decline in the size of both men's and women's personal networks, and an apparent 'closing in' of the nuclear family, one of the key findings from the 2004 GSS in relation to women's discussion networks over the last twenty years has been the increasing proportion of non-kin in their social support networks (McPherson et al., 2006, p. 362). When the survey was last conducted in 1985, women were found to have, as a proportion of their overall networks, significantly more kin confidants, and conversely, significantly fewer non-kin confidants, in comparison to men. The 2004 data indicates that while women continue to have more kin confidants than their male peers, they have also increased the number of non-kin confidants in their networks. Overall, women continue to have larger social networks than men (McPherson et al., p. 372). These findings would tend to support Gouldner and Strong's (cited in Coates, 1996, p. 42) contention that friendships are assuming a more important role in women's lives, despite the conclusions of McPherson et al's study, which appears to suggest otherwise.

Two parallel surveys (Boase et al., 2006) conducted around the same time as the 2004 GSS provide a different perspective, and suggest that the reduction in the size of core ties, as discussed in McPherson et al. (2006), may at least in part be explained by the survey instrument used in the 2004 GSS. As Boase, Horrigan, Wellman and Rainie note, the somewhat ambiguous concept of 'important matters' may be partly responsible for the apparent incongruity of these results (2006, p. 6). While the GSS participants were asked to identify the people with whom they'd discussed matters important to them over the last six months (McPherson et al., 2006, p. 355), Boase et al. point out that "there is more to being 'very close' to a person than being a confidant discussing matters. Having frequent intimate contact – whether in person or online – and providing help to each other clearly play roles" (2006, p. 6). It should be noted here that McPherson et al. also draw attention to the possibility that people may interpret 'important matters' differently, and that this could impact on the number of core discussion ties they name (p. 372). Boase et al. also note that similar methodological limitations in Putnam's study, noting that Putnam relied in part on survey findings that indicated that social events that bring people together, such as family picnics and card playing, had declined in the latter decades of the Twentieth Century. And yet, by shifting the focus of the survey questions to social *interactions*,

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[31] Although McPherson et al. note that the GSS survey on which they base their analysis measures ties across "the entire range of possible relationships ... (Spouse, Parent, Sibling, Child, Other family, Coworker, Member of group, Neighbor, Friend, Advisor, Other)" (2006, p. 357), their subsequent discussion on the strength of nuclear family ties only refers to "spouses, partners and parents" (p. 371). This may reflect the adult sample group – while there is no information on the ages of survey participants, it is possible that they were too young to have children old enough to use as confidants, and with whom they could discuss "personally important topics" (p. 355).

rather than particular social *events*, the authors contend that the results may provide a more authentic picture of changes to social networks. As they note, "the difficulty of travelling to get together may explain why picnics have declined as a way for friends and relatives to meet. Yet other ways of interacting have flourished, on and offline (Boase et al., p. 5).

Claude Fischer (2005) highlights other difficulties with Putnam's study that may impact on the size and maintenance of social networks. From Putnam's perspective, declining social participation represents a generational shift, as those born after 1940 prefer to spend their time watching television instead of participating in social and civic activities. However, as Fischer notes, Putnam did not factor in other social changes which are more likely to impinge on an individual's time than television viewing (2005, p. 159). Since the 1960s, women's participation in the paid labour force has increased markedly. In the United States, between 1960 and 2006 the proportion of women who were employed outside the home increased from 38% to 59%, and both men and women are now working in paid employment longer than ever before (Tracey Kennedy et al., 2008, pp. 1-2). The increase in the proportion of women in paid work has been even greater in Australia, rising from 23% in 1954 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998), to 58.6% in October 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009c). These changes in working patterns place extra demands upon families with younger children: "wives and husbands must negotiate multiple work and school schedules in addition to domestic work (such as cooking, cleaning and maintenance), child care, family time, and social and leisure activities" (Tracey Kennedy et al., p. 2). One of the consequences of this is that the amount of free time available to devote to voluntary organisations has declined (C. S. Fischer, p. 162). In addition, extended working hours particularly in the retail sector, which have increased the number of people working at weekends, may limit participation in social events such as picnics, as well as voluntary and sporting commitments.

Both Putnam and McPherson et al's conclusions also exhibit limitations in terms of how and where social relationships are sustained. Clearly, Putnam's focus on activities such as picnics, card games and bowling serves to underplay the significance of other manifestations of social connection that don't rely on physical co-presence. And yet, it could be argued that many social relationships have historically been sustained through mediated technologies, whether they be letters, cards and gifts posted, or telephone calls, emails and text messages (di Leonardo, 1987; Licoppe & Smoreda, 2006, p. 305). If one outcome of 'social capital' is the willingness of individuals to extend both practical and emotional support to those in their core social networks, then it follows that technologically mediated relationships can also encourage the development of associated social benefits that accrue with social capital. A significant body of research over the last 10 years reveals that new communication technologies such as email and mobile telephones, far from fragmenting family and social connections and contributing to social dislocation, are in fact serving to increase the overall quantity and quality of both local and distant social ties (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 120; Boase

et al., 2006, iv). Moreover, research identifies an association between the adoption of new communication technologies such as email to an individual's communication repertoire, and increased levels of social contact with friends and family using existing technologies, such as the landline telephone (Wilding, 2006, p. 131), as well as face-to-face meetings (Boase et al., p. 23). In fact, as Boase et al. note, "the current generation of email users is communicating much more often than recent generations and possibly more often than any previous generation" (p. 23). As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, increased interaction and increased positive sentiment are closely inter-related, such that higher rates of social interaction lead to closer relationships, which in turn fuel more interaction (Lawton et al., 1994, p. 58). The development of closer relationships leads to a greater willingness to both ask for, and extend care and support to each other (Wilding, p. 138). This relationship between communication technologies and family and social relationships will be discussed in detail in the remaining chapters of this thesis, but it is important to note that evidence of increased social interaction would appear to be at odds with McPherson et al's (2006, p. 371) findings that social networks are contracting to immediate family members such as partners and parents.

The notion of friendship as an integral element of social support networks is highlighted in a study examining the therapeutic value of women's friendships. Participants in this study indicated that female friendships made positive contributions to their "personal growth, support, or change" (Davidson & Packard, 1981, p. 501). This is particularly relevant in midlife, when women may be negotiating multiple changes in their lives. Potentially, female friendships can offer a level of support, nurturing and understanding that may not be available through the traditional family networks. Even where family relationships are strong, women still tend to look to their women friends for companionship and emotional support (Wellman & Wortley, 1990, p. 577). According to Apter and Josselson

> We tell our friends things about ourselves that we would not risk telling other people who are close to us. We do not tell a parent, because the foibles and poor behavior we reveal to a friend would, if told to a mother or father, arouse anxiety, and possibly set off a parental manoeuvre to control us. (1998, p. 149)

As Lillian Rubin's research highlighted, female friendships provide levels and nuances of emotional support and acceptance in ways that heterosexual relationships generally don't (1985, p. 65). Rubin's research also suggests that friendships outside of marriage provide an important emotional and social adjunct to married/coupled life, filling gaps and needs in ways that the marriage relationship doesn't (p. 136). Whereas it wasn't uncommon for married men in Rubin's study to look to their wife to satisfy their emotional needs, women's responses were very different:

> Whether they worked outside the home or not, few women thought of a husband in these terms, not because there were no shared intimacies between them, not because the relationship wasn't close and important, but because the women usually had [women] friends with whom they shared parts of themselves as well. (Rubin, 1985, p. 65)

Apter and Josselson suggest that women may choose not to share certain things with their partner for fear of exposing themselves to a partner's criticism, or being "told what to do next time" (1998, p. 150). In contrast to male/female relationships where males may be inclined to offer advice, female friendships are "centrally concerned with sharing and with reciprocity" (Coates, 1996, p. 277). According to Coates, a key element in women's friendships is a mutual willingness to mirror each others' feelings, to participate in what one of Coates' participants described as "vulnerable talking" (p. 177). This notion of female friendships as mutually empowering is also reflected in Braverman's comments on women's interactions: "In the flow of conversation, back and forth, women hear each other out, take each other seriously, care and feel cared for....In these ongoing dialogues, women reveal themselves" (cited in West, 2005, p. 104). This sense of acceptance and mutual growth came through in interviews conducted as part of my research, as evidenced in Beth's reflections on key supportive relationships during a recent difficult period in her life:

> I think we women share a lot more of what's going on in our lives and experience....I think women acknowledge feelings, more....a couple of my sisters were very supportive, whereas the brothers, they've not got that same sense of being with you in a situation that's really tough and you're feeling it. They seem to don't want to hear it. (Beth)

Moreover, during Beth's interview she flagged the importance of female friendships to her wellbeing:

> My family is extremely important to me, and if [husband] or [sons] need me, well then I'll be there, but I've also made it clear to them that in order for me to be a good wife and mum, I need my female friends, because that's where I get my support and understanding, a lot of it. (Beth)

The interpersonal dynamics underpinning women's networks of support are hinted at in Gillian's thoughts on the support she receives from a close female friend:

> But with the relationship that we've got... because she'd been through some emotional stuff as well, and I know that if ever I need, I can just ring her, and she'll say "What's up?", and that's it, she knows. She was a huge listener, yeah. So I think we all have somebody, but another female, yeah. And you share stuff with that female that you probably, even though you've got your spouse ... they listen, but they don't have that feminine connection, you know?....I mean there are some guys, but you know, if you've got an alpha-type male, takes a little while to, you know, they'll listen, but then it's like, they're not really switched into it. And that's not knocking him at all....and I mean he's wonderful. He'll give me the hugest hug, and there'll be a lot of warmth and love there, but that's what you get. *And that's all you get*. You don't get that reflection that another female is able to give you. So that's why female connections and groups are so important. (Gillian)

Gillian's comments echo previous research which suggests women often find their women friends are interested and will listen to them in ways their husbands won't (Apter & Josselson, 1998, p. 45). For Gillian, her friend's ability to listen is a key element of the support that she can offer Gillian during difficult times. But as my research suggests, there are also important reciprocal benefits

to be gained from women's supportive relationships. As the following passage demonstrates, while Beth's husband sees his wife's friendships as a potential burden to her, Beth's perspective is quite different:

> My husband is great, but if one of those girls rang me, he would see it that they were making me feel worse. But they weren't. You know, he took a dislike to them before he even met them, because they were ringing me and sharing their problems with me....and I would say [to husband], "Well look....I wish that I could make it [friends' problems] all go away for them. But it's not adding to my problems at all." So, I think that's what women do, I think we can debrief and it really is a problem shared is a problem halved. (Beth)

However, as Apter and Josselson caution, rather than portray women as biologically 'wired' to be naturally supportive of each other, this quality should more accurately be viewed as developing through gendered socialisation practices: "this capacity to listen empathically, to pick up and shape ideas together, is not simply inbred. Rather, it is a talent constantly honed in the world of girls' and women's friendships" (Apter & Josselson, 1998, p. 80). It should also be noted that there can be limits to the degree of support available from friends, or at least the perception of availability, especially when difficulties extend over a long period of time. This issue came up in my interview with Rita. Having brought up a son on her own for most of the past 30 years, and now heavily involved in supervising the care of a mother with dementia, Rita feels a strong need to 'ration' her requests for help and support. While she has a close friend who she can talk to, this friend has also been going through some difficulties, and so Rita is reluctant to burden her with her own worries. She is also very conscious of not overburdening her son with her 'middle-aged worries', nor of intruding too much on his time with his new wife. The contradiction between an ideal situation in which single friends are 'there for each other', and the lonely reality Rita lives with on a daily basis, is evident in the following comment:

> We [single friends] should rely on each other when times are tough, but we don't, we tend to hibernate. You don't want to be a burden. Independence is not a flag you fly - you have it foisted on you. (Rita).

Moreover, as Anna's interview reveals, support offered through female friendships doesn't necessarily always conform to romanticised notions. While her two close friends seemed unable or unwilling to offer reflective listening support to Anna during a recent psychological illness, they nevertheless helped her in other significant ways:

> You know, when [friend] knew that I was struggling, she made a point of ringing me up at least once a week, and then coming over once a week, so I mean I know that I could count on her, but by the same token, she wouldn't really want to discuss how I'm feeling, you know?

> *So they're there to provide practical support? Perhaps provide a meal if you're not up to cooking... is that what you're getting at?*

Well even the emotional support. Those weeks where I was emotionally struggling day to day, [friend] would ring me up, and not that it was an opening to talk about how I was feeling, but she would just let me know that she cared. She cared. She was at work, but she was just ringing to see how I was feeling that day, and tomorrow she was off, or in two days time she was off, and we would do this or do that in two days time.

Ok. And what did that mean to you?

That was incredibly important....just having that contact... it was just that someone still cared.....she [a concerned friend] can't make it better, but she was certainly willing to just be there, even if we didn't talk about how bad I was feeling. Which is probably just as important. (Anna)

As Anna's story suggests, friends may be even more necessary during times of crisis and transition, such as the period leading up to and following a relationship breakdown. According to Coughy, divorced women often find that "friends are crucial for the emotional support they offer and the link to the outside world they provide" (cited in Rubin, 1985, p. 10). For some women, the ability to talk with others experiencing similar difficulties can help them come to terms with their changing circumstances. Such is the case with Sherrie, a recently re-married woman. During a difficult separation at the end of her first marriage, Sherrie was able to confide in a group of close women friends who were also experiencing similar problems. As Sherrie reflected, "our closeness was because of the separation we were going through, we were all going through the same shit. And just adjusting to being a single parent, independent again, starting all over again."

Apart from helping each other negotiate life as single women, friends can also provide a 'sounding board' during difficult times. While Sherrie was able to talk to her mother and sister, she also valued the opportunity to 'vent' to her friends:

We used to solve the problems of the world. There was a group of us at the time, 'cause I was working part-time back then, trying to sort out custody of the kids. In and out of court all the time....I felt like I was always constantly battling and fighting. The girls were good. And what we used to do was meet [and go for a walk]. There were five of us at the time, and [we would] sort out all the issues. We might start off silent, then we'd start talking, somebody else would give advice. Maybe it was just listening, or whatever, and by the time we'd get back we were right. The whole weight of it [lifted]. I was saying to my girlfriend the other day, I realised we used to walk up there, and you could see those, the Watsonia [wildflower], could see it just about curling over as we walked past 'cause we just had all this bad energy and everyone was angry, and by the time we came back they were sprouting back up again [laughs]. (Sherrie)

Whether women subsequently remarry or remain single, evidence indicates they continue to rely upon their women friends for support and companionship. As Moyal notes

Not only do more women live alone, undergo marital break-up or separation, and assume responsibilities as single parents, but, in a period of rising feminist influence and ideas, they find increasing support and emotional and intellectual stimulus from women friends. (1992, p. 57)

Moyal's implied notion of a 'sisterhood' is explicitly referred to by one of the participants in my research project. Divorced for a number of years, 54 year old Dana draws strength from a core group of female friends, as illustrated in the following comments:

Can you tell me who you turn to when you need to talk to someone... if something's worrying you?

Um, probably the sisterhood, first. Ah, and certainly when I was going through my divorce it was the sisterhood who provided me with support. Having said that ... if anyone in the family needs help we pull together, so certainly my family is a support network. [However], intellectually, and probably emotionally, it's my female colleagues and friends who provide support for me, and have done so continually over the years... I've always had a core group of close female friends I can rely on, to seek emotional support.

Have you found it's become more important as you've got older?

Yes. *Definitely*, and also because I am *not* in a relationship with a male, and no intention of getting into any sort of close relationship with a man again. I have been married ... and I don't need that anymore....And I think women are more and more finding their emotional support in the sisterhood network, and a lot of them are looking for it too, particularly if their bloke is an Australian male that does very blokey things with blokes and tends to shut... you know there's not a partnership there for the family, the women look elsewhere. (Dana)

As Dana's comments imply, women's friendships are therapeutic not simply during periods of crisis, when this support may act as a psychological buffer; they also perform an ongoing role in boosting women's self-esteem and resilience (Davidson & Packard, 1981, p. 501). Indeed, Side's research into women's friendships identified emotional support as "a commitment to friends in both everyday situations and during crises" (Side, 1997, p. 129). Thus, as with kinship networks, women's friendships represent another channel through which women exchange care and support. As discussed, this support is particularly important in the context of challenges women face during their midlife years.

4.3 Mediating Support: The Role of Computer-Mediated Pathways for the Provision and Exchange of Social Support

4.3.1 *The circulation of social support within existing social networks*

As noted previously, prior to the widespread adoption of communication technologies, most notably the telephone, support was exchanged predominantly through personal interactions, and thus was largely constrained by geographical parameters (Young & Willmott, 1962, p. 137). Significant social changes over the last 50 years, including the women's movement, increasing suburbanisation, and higher levels of global migration, have seen family and social networks become increasingly diverse and dispersed. Likewise, the rapid development and adoption of a wide range of communication technologies has also altered the conduits through which women communicate and

exchange support. As research indicates, mediated communication technologies such as the telephone (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992), and more recently the mobile telephone (Rakow & Navarro, 1993) and the Internet (Boase et al., 2006; Bonniface & Green, 2007), have come to play an increasingly important role in enabling women's social and support networks. Research indicates that email, the most common online activity for women, is being appropriated as a channel through which women exchange care and support through their everyday conversations (Conforti, 2001, p. 157). Women's email messages, even those sent for a specific purpose such as co-ordinating activities, often include personal elements that reinforce relationships, (Boneva et al., 2001, p. 543), and can provide "indispensable emotional support" (Boneva et al., p. 544). As one of Conforti's participants explained, a friendship maintained through daily emails provides a symbolic "shoulder to cry on and an ear to listen when she needs to talk about her frustrations with her son, her schoolwork, or her new job" (2001, p. 157).

Indeed, the marked degree to which many women have incorporated online communication practices within their everyday lives suggests that the distinction between traditional and new platforms for social interaction and support are increasingly blurred. Accordingly, "how we both experience and provide social support is changing....the patterns of social interaction within which social support is implicitly embedded ... will also be increasingly mediated by various forms of ICT" (Nettleton et al., 2002, p. 177). The women interviewed in this current research project are utilising the Internet, to varying degrees, to access and exchange social support in their everyday lives. While almost all the participants are very comfortable using email, and have integrated it into their everyday communication patterns, a significant minority identified other online channels such as discussion forums as conduits for the exchange of social support. Of the 40 women interviewed, over 25% (11 women) have used another form of online channel besides email, to either access or offer social support. In their interviews, it has become apparent that their use of online communication technologies reflects not only their own technological competencies and preferences, but also, and more significantly, the social context in which their communication takes place.

Echoing previous research which indicates that the communication modes of face-to-face and the telephone convey a higher level of "social presence"[32] (Short et al., 1976, p. 65), and are generally considered more appropriate for conveying emotion than text-based communication channels such as email and text messaging using mobile telephones (SMS) (Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 242; Matzko, 2002, p. 64), the majority of my participants perceived face-to-face and the telephone as superior communication modes for accessing or providing support. A preference for face-to-face interaction is summed up in the following comments by Anna:

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[32] The concept of 'social presence', and the research participants' perceptions on the suitability of different communication technologies for particular tasks, is discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

I think my instinctive choice for communication is face to face if that is possible. There is something validating about talking and seeing another accept your thoughts/feelings or emotions. With a face to face conversation, touch, including hugs, is possible; someone holding your hand or giving a hug is comforting, giving a sense of belonging or at least not being alone. (Anna)

Notwithstanding this, the interviews provide evidence that email can be an effective channel through which women are prepared to discuss sensitive or emotional issues, and access or offer social support. Such is the case with Paula, who has established a close and supportive relationship with a female cousin after visiting her on an overseas holiday several years ago. As Paula notes, "I could be actually quite explicit with her [cousin] on email, and feel quite comfortable with that."

When looked at in isolation, Paula's comments reflect much of the literature on CMC, which suggests the medium encourages individuals to self-disclose more often than they would normally (Joinson & Paine, 2007, p. 239). However, as the following reflections by Paula indicate, this technologically deterministic approach to framing online interaction ignores the social context in which communication takes place. Although Paula occasionally talks to her cousin by telephone, she relies more heavily upon email for their day-to-day connections. When asked if she ever used VOIP (Internet enabled telephone service), she responded: "I should do but it just becomes then very very long-winded, and I'm kind of avoiding it because I know that I'll end up being more and more on the phone, you know?" (Paula).

As is evident in Paula's story, individuals draw on a range of media in their everyday lives; as such the nature of their communication in any one medium is not necessarily driven by particular qualities that may be considered unique to the medium, such as anonymity or the ability to converse without visual cues, but may rather be read as reflecting 'strategic choices' individuals make when selecting from a range of media (Joinson, 2007, p. 76). Thus, as Joinson notes, "Internet behaviour needs to take account of both the user as well as the media itself" (2004, p. 473). For Paula, the choice to converse with her cousin by email is influenced by the opportunity it presents to manage her time better, and by the fact she can do it at a time that is convenient to her. Given that she spends time with her cousin when they meet on holidays, and enjoys 'heart-to-heart' conversations then as well, it's questionable how pivotal the medium is to the level of self-disclosure and sharing that takes place between Paula and her cousin. In this context, Paula is empowered to share her deepest feelings with her cousin not because of any particular quality of the *medium*, but because of the strength of the *relationship* that underpins their communication – both in online and offline situations. Similarly, for those participants who reported being comfortable sharing private thoughts and emotions through online channels, the majority immediately qualified their remark by noting they would only do so with certain people. This attitude is summed up by Corinne, when asked whether she felt comfortable discussing personal or intimate issues via email:

Well that friend [overseas] ... yeah, definitely we do. Yeah, you know, like I've told her very much my feelings when Mum was first diagnosed and that kind of thing.

Okay.

And she has reciprocated 'cause her mother died recently and so yeah, very much intimate....[but] I would certainly sort of pick my audience. So, yeah. Like I know her ability to hear me clearly and I her. (Corinne)

Such a qualification suggests that women need to feel a degree of trust with the person they are communicating with before they will commit themselves to sharing their thoughts through email. Also related to this is the concern put forward by several of the women that emails can be easily misconstrued, or may be read by people other than the intended recipient. Indeed, several women expressed a reluctance to convey personal and private information through emails in case they were mistakenly sent to the wrong person. When I asked Gina, a single mother, whether she shared her concerns and worries with her friends via email, she replied

> I've got two girlfriends that are very close physically and, we've got kids, we're on the pension, and all that sort of stuff. We will sit and talk for hours, and we'll both look at each other and go, "My God, we've just had the same conversation that we had last week!", but you need to do that, get it out there, and we know that what we say to each other while we're over coffee can be the most vitriolic, bitchy, but we know it won't go any further. Whereas I still... I mean I've said some really horrible things to my girlfriend and vice versa, but I wouldn't put it in an email because other people can read it, it can be accidentally sent to the wrong person, whereas if you're just chatting you know it's not going to go anywhere. (Gina)

Many of the women also use email in a strategic way to offer support and guidance to their young adult children. In particular, several women who indicated that communicating with sons is sometimes a challenge have found email a useful tool. For Felicity, email provides a platform from which to offer advice at 'arm's length'. "You know, he's nearly 25, and he really doesn't want to hear it, but if I just put a little bit in an email, [he's] got to read it." Another participant, Ellie, finds offering support to adult children can sometimes resemble walking through a minefield, as concern and guidance can so easily be interpreted as interference or nagging. In these situations, email can provide a 'softly softly' approach which may potentially make the message more palatable to the receiver:

> At the moment it's all ok, but I was just even thinking last night, I need to contact him [son]. Now often I'll just ... I'll text him "Thinking of you, catch up with you soon." Email, from work, which will obviously go to his work. I'm a bit reluctant, I'd like to be able to email him more, but I know he's busy at the other end. And because he's not such a communicator, everything's just "Everything's alright."

Would you phone him?

> No. What I would do though, which I have done in the past....I would find websites, just in my travels around the Net at work or I see things on TV....So I will email those sites, "Just in case you might want to check these out." So that is how I communicate to

my kids. Now my son, there was something that I found written on the Net that I wanted to convey to him, and it was on a website about relationships, and marriage, but I'm still a little bit hesitant because I don't want to interfere....So it's a fine line. (Ellie)

Another participant, Katrina, had gone through a period where she had exchanged daily emails with her sister, who had been having a difficult time emotionally following a marriage breakdown. While their emails are no longer so frequent, Katrina still uses their email exchanges to 'keep an eye' on how her sister is doing: "If I can see she's not answering my emails, I might get a bit concerned and I'll ring then to see what's happening."

Beyond these more targeted messages of support, many women are also using email on an everyday basis to offer a more general level of encouragement and affirmation. As Paula explains, occasional short emails to her daughter, who now lives some distance from home, not only sustain a loving connection, but also convey care and support:

What about emailing your daughter?

I email her at work....I try not to bombard her at work because she's fairly busy, so every now and again a little one will pop up, and she'll say, "Are you there Mum?" and she just needs to know that I'm there, and you know, I send her one back. (Paula)

Even where voice communication is the preferred option, email can still prove emotionally satisfying. While Robyn describes herself as "very much a voice person", preferring where possible to have voice conversations, she has found that her email exchanges with a friend living overseas can be as mutually gratifying and supportive as telephone conversations: "I found with [friend] we were writing very long letters [emails] to each other, what we were up to, family problems....yeah, real sister sort of stuff, you know?" Similarly, Debbie's email correspondence with an older semi-housebound female friend provides an ongoing conversation that appears to be mutually beneficial:

She [friend] loves the email, she loves the computer. Because she lives on her own, she's in her 70s, and she's retired, her mind's active but physically she's not that well. So that can make [it difficult]....So emailing her, she likes that....Like her other friends, they don't always contact her on the email for a chat as regularly as I do, I don't think....She likes that ongoing sort of communication; it's just like having somebody there for her, in the house, somebody she can go and talk to....Yes, I think she appreciates that a lot. Yeah, it's good actually. I think because you know you can just clock on and just have a chat and if there's anything bothering me I can say and she'll say something reassuring back, you know? (Debbie)

Email can also be a useful conduit through which care and support can be conveyed at critical times. When Katherine was living overseas for several months, email enabled her to extend support to a friend newly diagnosed with cancer:

I was away ... without email I don't know what [I'd have done]. So I would get this email from her [friend], that's how she told everybody, she sent emails, so I was in on that, saying, "Hi guys, I've got cancer", it was like "Aargh", you know?...."Oh, guess what, I've got to have both breasts off." Now the other girls were able to all rally

around and go and see her in hospital and ... I felt very far away at that time. But I sent [friend] an email saying, "I'm sending you vibes of, you know, sending you all my support down the email line", kind of thing, and yeah, just communicated with her that way, and with the other guys then, behind her back a little bit, how she was going and what they were doing....but being able to email was, yeah, really helpful. (Katherine)

Moreover, as the following comments suggest, email enabled Katherine to offer support in a way that not only minimised her own awkwardness, but which also respected her friend's choice to communicate her diagnosis of cancer by email:

I think she's probably happier to deal with it by email than by a phone conversation in a way, because she was able to, you know, if you trigger them off they then are upset, you know, and they don't want you to, they were just getting it together, and you never know the right time to [discuss their illness]. (Katherine)

In this context, arguably the text-based, asynchronous nature of email provided an opportunity for Katherine's friend to share her feelings in a way that may not have been possible in a face-to-face or telephone conversation. A similar dynamic is illustrated in Nettleton et al's research. As one participant in a stillbirth support list noted, email provided the opportunity for people to "express exactly what they felt without embarrassment ... or fear of saying the wrong thing" (2002, p. 185).

The critical link that email can provide during times of crisis is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Corinne's experiences leading up to the death of her father. As with both Katherine and Paula's reflections, Corinne found email provided an appropriate level of contact when communicating face-to-face or by telephone was too 'raw'. When asked what email meant to her, Corinne replied:

It does help keep you in touch. It does, it just creates a little tenuous or not so tenuous, little fine thread that sort of supports the relationship....[during] the last couple of weeks with my dad, I couldn't … when it was sort of really quite critical … I'm a bit of a sook and I cry quite easily and I couldn't really talk to anybody face-to-face because I just would've broken down, but I could email friends. And they could email me back just with "Just know that we really feel for you and we're praying for you" and all that kind of thing. And it really did help because I got … because I felt that I just, I just didn't really want to talk to anybody face-to-face and that really brought it home to me that, yeah. (Corinne)

In this context email, with its low levels of cues, enables messages of support to be extracted from an otherwise (potentially) overwhelming communication of care and concern.

Even prefabricated emails – emails containing the jokes, stories, images and other generic material that are forwarded from person to person through email networks – can carry discrete messages of care and support. While such emails can be particularly unpopular (Pew Internet and American Life Project, cited in Kibby, 2005, p. 770), they may at times perform a social function, serving "to remind partners of each other's existence, and, as such, preserve[ing] a relationship as a

potential resource for companionship, advice, or social support at some later time" (Boneva et al., 2001, p. 542). Certainly, while many of the women interviewed as part of this current research project find prefabricated emails annoying and time-wasting, they represent for at least some of the women an opportunity to gently remind a friend or relative that they are thinking of them. As the following comment suggests, the forwarding of prefabricated or 'junk' emails implies a weighing up of the nuisance value against the potential they may have to support someone:

> I don't send junk emails. Once or twice I have sent something really nice, once of those feel good ones, to a friend because it's time they've needed a 'feel good' [message], and I've sent this and said, "I really like this and I hope you do." But that's like, me to them. It's one, and it's been a couple of times ever. Other than that I don't forward them on. (Felicity)

The 'weighing up' implicit in Felicity's statement supports Kibby's research examining why people forward these type of emails, with one reason offered being the "possibility of helping or of making a difference" to others' lives" (2005, p. 788). Moreover, as the following comment by Ellie suggests, prefabricated messages have become another way in which women support each other through their everyday email conversations:

> I've got another girlfriend ... now she also has just split up from her husband, and she moved out a couple of weekends ago. She lives just down the street ... at work they're very quick emails, but it's usually in work time, cause she's sitting on her computer, I'm sitting on mine. We send each other just little feel good stuff, you know, here, you might need this today, or this one came in as an attachment, this makes me feel good. (Ellie)

4.3.2 Building and extending support networks: The role of computer-mediated communication channels as conduits to new sources of support

So far in this chapter the situations discussed describe women's actions in accessing and offering support within relatively limited family and social networks. For the most part the women interviewed in this research project are telephoning or emailing people, either relatives or friends, that they know offline. Within the context of communication with known others in particular online environments, there is generally a social requirement to present a coherent and recognisable image that conforms to an individual's offline behaviour. As such, the degree to which individuals are willing to disclose aspects of themselves which they may not be comfortable with or may feel awkward sharing with friends and relatives (Palandri & Green, 2000, p. 635), or which they fear may convey a negative impression (Joinson, 2004, p. 472), is likely to be limited. Moreover, as Vicki's discussion on her mother's reluctance to offer emotional support (in Section 4.2.2) suggests, sharing difficulties with even close family members can leave an individual vulnerable, and may create an element of awkwardness or discomfort in future interactions.

In contrast, online environments such as chat lines and discussion forums present the potential for anonymous interaction, without the fear of repercussions in offline social networks. This

phenomenon is highlighted in early Internet research. According to some researchers, the anonymity inherent in many online environments encourages greater levels of disinhibition and self-disclosure than are evident in offline communication environments (Danet, 1998; Joinson, 2007; Suler, 2004). Two of the women interviewed in my research indicated that their use of platforms such as chat rooms enabled them to be more honest in their communication, and at least temporarily leave behind the restrictions, responsibilities and worries of their daily lives. As Robyn's interview reveals, the element of anonymity present in chat rooms encouraged her to reflect upon her marriage, and explore her own identity in a relatively repercussion-free environment. In this context, Robyn's engagement in these sites facilitated a cathartic experience; one which is unlikely to be available in normal communication settings. As Robyn noted, during the early stages of her marriage difficulties, she had been reluctant to talk to anyone besides her mother:

> It was sort of something I did keep to myself. I didn't go around telling people. Because in a way I blamed myself, for what happened [marriage difficulties]. It was... I couldn't lay myself out there and tell people. (Robyn)

However, the anonymous environment in chat rooms, coupled with established norms of behaviour which support a more open and uninhibited interactional style, enabled Robyn to express herself more freely. While Robyn may reflect back on her openness in these chat rooms with some embarrassment, there is nevertheless a recognition that her online exchanges were valuable at the time, and enabled her to develop a greater sense of confidence and self-esteem:

> Yes, I will say I did some things, and spoke about things that now I'm embarrassed about, but at the time I think there was a need. But then, there became a period in that time where, I don't need this [chat communication] anymore. I don't want this anymore. And I was able to say, that's enough.

And how did that feel?

> Very, very empowering. And so, it was like I had to go through this... I know it sounds awful, but crap, or rubbish, or whatever word we want to use, to get to where I am now. Because I didn't have many boyfriends. Really, [husband] was probably number one. He was the first guy I really went out with....And so I hadn't really communicated with men. I really had not been out in the world of men....So, this was sort of, here I was, 45, 46, talking to all these guys, talking about... which is probably what I would have done, had I mixed in a... [circle of friends which included more males] when I was younger. (Robyn)

However, as indicated by Paula's reflections on the merits of email over telephone, individuals' communication choices and behaviours are likely to be motivated by more than simply a desire to be anonymous. As Joinson notes, "the prevalence of intimate communication (as occurs, for instance, in online social support forums) is a product of the motivated choices users make, rather than necessarily an outcome of media use per se" (Joinson, 2004, p. 472). Individuals make strategic communication choices every day, based on a number of factors, including their motivation, the communication task, the social context, and the communication tools available. Just as some

individuals prefer to use face-to-face or telephone communication to convey sympathy or care, so too is it likely that others will choose particular online environments to seek support and advice, either as an alternative, or in addition to, offline sources of support.

Moreover, in contrast to traditional sources of social support, such as family and friends, and formal sources, such as professional counselling, computer-mediated support offers an opportunity to connect with others who have experienced similar difficulties. As such, this form of support can potentially offer a more empathetic level of understanding than both traditional informal and formal support sources. Social support through online channels is most often associated with the proliferation of self-help newsgroups that cater for a diverse range of social and health issues (Burrows, cited in Nettleton et al., 2002, p. 179). But social support can also be manifested through a variety of other online environments, such as web forums, synchronous chat rooms such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC), and through instant messaging services such as MSN Messenger, online games, Internet-enabled telephone services (Skype), and email. A significant body of research documents the role of 'self-help' newsgroups and discussion forums in delivering social support (Bonniface, Green, & Swanson, 2006; Nettleton et al., 2002). The way in which informal online forums can provide support for women in midlife is illustrated in a study of a discussion group focused on "menopause and midlife transition" (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, 2002, p. 398). Using content analysis of messages posted to the forum over a three year period, Bresnahan and Murray-Johnson conclude that "it is possible to develop meaningful, socially supportive relationships in the context of a computer-mediated discussion group" (p. 405). Many of the women in this group stressed disappointment with the nature of support offered by medical practitioners, citing a general reluctance by doctors to listen closely to the women's experiences and concerns (p. 403). Bresnahan and Murray-Johnson contend this devaluing of women's voices is compounded by a tendency among some women who are fortunate to have relatively few problems during menopause, to discount the very real difficulties other women may encounter during this transition (p. 400). In this context, online forums may provide a potentially non-judgmental and anonymous environment where women can exchange support, advice and information with their peers.

However, the value of informal health support sites goes far beyond the exchange of information and advice relating to particular health conditions. In observing a number of health support sites over a period of several months, Jenny Preece noticed "that similar questions were asked again and again by different people" (1999, p. 64). Preece's initial response was to wonder why there was no Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) file to provide such oft-requested information, and therefore save regular posters from having to repeatedly respond to the same questions. However, it soon became clear to Preece that something else was going on in these sites that extended the nature of communication beyond a simple sharing of information:

It was about identifying and communicating with others experiencing similar problems. These people could identify strongly with the fear, the pain, the inconvenience, the frustrations, and the delights expressed by others who were recovering from an accident, surgery or illness. They were either going through similar experiences or they had been there. (Preece, 1999, p. 65)

As Preece concluded, the "compelling ingredient" in many of the online interactions was the empathy displayed by participants (1999, p. 65). Similarly, Bonniface and Green found that online self-help groups provide an empathic communications environment, where individuals can meet others "travelling [the same] ... difficult path" (2007, p. 70). Moreover, being able to communicate and identify with someone who can understand the fear, discomfort and frustration accompanying many conditions, can be an invaluable support that may not be available through an individual's conventional social networks. This dynamic is evident in Vicki's experiences with an online support group. Divorced after a long-term marriage, and subsequently involved for several years in an emotionally abusive relationship, Vicki's self-esteem was badly shaken. The difficulties she'd experienced in recent years had taken a toll on her support network. Exacerbating Vicki's limited sources of support, the stigma attached to domestic abuse made it difficult for her to reach out for help, and for friends and family to fully understand and offer the appropriate support. While Vicki did access professional counselling, she also looked for her own answers to her dilemma. After searching the Internet exhaustively for information that might help explain her ex-partner's behaviour, and the situation she found herself in, Vicki found a support group for people who had suffered similar emotional abuse:

I mean, people [friends and family] can be sympathetic and understanding, but, I mean you know....so to actually have that sort of support. There are some really wise people in there [online forum] that have been through it. And people that really understand what you've been through. And I found it really useful, really helpful. (Vicki)

As Vicki's comments imply, although the anonymity offered on this forum provided a 'safe' environment for Vicki to share her experiences, this was not the chief factor motivating her decision to participate. More importantly for Vicki, the online forum offered the opportunity to share her feelings with others who had experienced similar abuse: "people in that sort of, who've been through that, are really the only people that really understand what you've been through" (Vicki). Through this online support site, Vicki has also been able to develop an ongoing connection with another woman who has also suffered through an abusive relationship. Their communication has now moved from the support site to personal emails, supplemented by the occasional text message and telephone call. Moreover, by locating a relevant support site on the Internet, Vicki has been able to tap into a source of support that is unlikely to be available to her through any other medium; a form of support that not only supplements support she receives through traditional channels, but one which best meets her needs at this particular point in her journey of recovery. Significantly, while Vicki's online support 'buddy' started out as a stranger, Vicki now considers her a friend. Thus, not only has Vicki

broadened the network of support she can call on, but, in the process, she has also extended her social network.

Although Katrina didn't find an online health support site until sometime after her initial health crisis, she has nevertheless found it a valuable source of understanding and support; one which has enabled her to reflect back upon her experiences and the consequences her health crisis has had on her life. When asked what role she felt this support site had played in her recovery, Katrina replied

> It's been really valuable, I think. I think otherwise my [health condition] ... when you have something like that and you're not really talking to other people about it, it just kind of... it's a bit hard to explain. I suppose it was really helpful for me to talk about it, because I hadn't really spoken about it to anyone. Not intentionally, I mean everyone was wonderful when I was sick. Family and friends coming around, meals and assisting with the family, that type of thing, but to actually be able to talk with someone else. And I suppose it's the same with any support group, you're just talking to people who've been through the same thing. So yes, it has been really really helpful to me. 'Cause I think I'd pushed it to the back of my mind, a bit, so it was actually good to bring it out and talk about it. (Katrina)

A similar dynamic is evident in Paula's experiences. Diagnosed several years ago with a very rare health condition, Paula had been unable to find anybody else who had had to deal with these challenges, until she recently discovered an email-based support group for people with her specific chronic illness. Although she normally considers herself a fairly self-contained person, her feelings on making contact with another participant in this group overwhelmed her:

> I'm a fairly private person I suppose....I very rarely look for, I guess, emotional support in that sense from people. What I found with the support group, the first email that came in, "Hi, my name is Bec, I have [health condition] and I've been living with it for about 11 years", and I cried for about an hour, I absolutely cried my eyes out. Firstly, that she'd taken the time to email me, and also that she was living with the condition, she was still alive, and she'd had it for 11 years. And all of a sudden I wasn't all alone. There was somebody out there in the world who had what I had ... who was managing and coping, and had been for 11 years. And I was an emotional wreck for about an hour, and I was thinking, you bloody idiot, stop! And I just couldn't, because I was just so relieved, all these emotions came up. I couldn't explain to anyone how that felt, and what I had felt like for the last nine months trying to find somebody, and I guess I didn't realise myself how important it was for me to find someone. I'm seeing things just so much clearer, a lot differently....I guess I feel at the moment I actually have got a life to go ahead with now, whereas before I really wasn't sure. (Paula)

The depth of Paula's feelings highlight the unique role online support can play in the context of an individual's broader social support networks. Even though she has a close and loving network of family and friends, they have not been able to offer the type of ongoing support that Paula most needs as she comes to terms with living with a chronic, life threatening condition. Only through her online interactions has Paula been able to connect with others who can truly understand and empathise, and can offer a more targeted form of support (Nettleton et al., 2002, p. 187). Perhaps most importantly, this connection has empowered Paula by giving her an indication of what might lie ahead in the

coming years; a sense that she has some control over her situation. The support she receives through this group not only performs at a macro level by helping her feel more positive about her future, but also provides her with information and guidance to help her cope with the more critical aspects of her condition on a day-to-day basis, and thus works as a buffer during times of stress (Westen et al., 2006, p. 586). Through this strategic support, Paula is better able to proactively manage her condition, which has positive implications for her ongoing physical and emotional wellbeing.

While women such as Vicki and Paula weren't particularly drawn to the element of anonymity offered in many online environments, several other women in this research project did value the opportunity to 'vent' in a safe and relatively repercussion-free communication space. Following a bitter and drawn out divorce and custody dispute, Sherrie welcomed the playful dynamics of online chat; Internet relay chat (IRC) provided a platform through which she could escape the stresses and responsibilities of her everyday life. However, while it was obvious from her interview that many of Sherrie's 'chats' were very light-hearted or flirtatious in nature, they nevertheless provided the opportunity for a more serious exchange of support and care, as is evident from the following excerpt:

> Even people I chatted with - I didn't meet them, but they were really quite good friends. Over a couple of years I could talk to them at any time of night. Once they got through the idea that I wasn't out to date them, it was just friendship....But they were great friends for when I was on my own. The kids were in bed. It was like I could talk to somebody just through typing, you know? It was fine.

> *Can I ask what sort of things you would discuss with them?*

> Um, "How's your day been? How're things going?" It was sort of like, we counselled each other. If he was having a hard time with his daughter, I'd suggest different things, you know. "Maybe you've got to do this, or maybe you should back off", or, give each other a bit of advice. Or if I was really low about something, if my ex-husband had come in again, they might write back and say, "Do you want me to come over and break his legs or something like that?" [laughs]. And even that was nice, 'cause even though I didn't have a man in my life, it felt like I had a man in my life that was supportive and protective of me. I knew that I could call them at any time and they'd come and look after me, or help me, you know? They knew the situation with my separation, the tough time I was going through with my ex-husband, so, yeah, it was very supportive. (Sherrie)

For another participant, Robyn, participation in 'romance' chat rooms met a need for companionship and validation during a difficult and lonely period in her marriage. As the following discussion indicates, Robyn's conversations with men in chat rooms represented at least a temporary substitute for intimacy with her husband, and also enabled her to develop a deeper and more supportive friendship with at least one other person:

> I mean, when I went through a very lonely period, I was in the chat rooms a lot, and half the time you didn't know if you were talking to a male or a female. I really wanted to ... talk to people, 'cause I was really lonely.

So you went into these rooms just for someone to talk to?

Just to talk to, some company, some contact....But then I did meet one guy in a chat room, and we've been friends ever since. And I found myself talking to them [males on chat room site], because it was really my husband that I wanted to speak to. Which I look at as quite a strange phenomenon, if that's the right words to use. The realisation of it was, that what I spoke to them about was what I would rather be speaking to my husband about, and when [husband] was going through his midlife crisis, I actually asked these guys their point of view. (Robyn)

To some extent the chat rooms Robyn participated in also provided a platform through which she could work through personal issues in a way she hadn't been able to do with anyone else, and restored, at least temporarily, a stronger sense of self:

So when you were communicating with these people, fairly regularly, how would you describe what it meant to you?

It was interesting. Whenever I started these conversations, it was like, like I wasn't even tired, it like I was peeling off the old me. I would feel that situation all the time. It was like the old me was peeled away, and while I was speaking to them, communicating with them, it was like, I was the person that I used to be. Friendly, someone wanted to talk to me, there was a need for both that we needed to communicate. There was a need of helping each other....You know, you are a friendly person, you are a good person, you are a nice person. And that's what I was feeling at that time, and there was a need for me to feel that way. To talk that way.

What was it about that particular environment that enabled you to do that?

Because there was no... I suppose in a way you could say it was a form of flirting, but there was no sexual sort of thing there. I wasn't trying to pick someone up. It was just talking to someone who knew me for me. Didn't know me because I was [husband's] wife, or [daughters'] mother, or [mother's] daughter... anyone's whatever. They were meeting me and getting to know me, for me. And that was an important thing for me, because I'd always been labelled through other people. Yeah, getting to know me for me. Probably the easiest way to put that. (Robyn)

Robyn's experiences echo earlier findings by Conforti in her research on women's self-development through computer-mediated relationships. Conforti's participants described their online interactions as a "'freeing experience' where they were not seen first as an age, weight, race, or gender" (2001, p. 273). As Conforti notes, rather than perceiving this process as constructing a new self, it should more accurately be read as "a redefining of self without the barrier of physical appearance and restrictions of social contexts" (p. 273). Similarly, Robyn's participation in romance chat rooms did not result in the construction of a new sense of identity, but rather enabled her to develop a definition of self which for her was more authentic and honest.

As these women's experiences demonstrate, women access and exchange social support through a variety of online channels, including more conventional conduits such as email. However, as Vicki, Paula, Sherrie and Robyn's stories indicate, women are also actively extending their social support networks through their participation in a range of other online environments, such as health

support sites, discussion forums and chat rooms. While not all connections developed in such online environments may lead to ongoing supportive relationships, as is the case for Paula and Vicki, the interviews provide evidence to suggest that notwithstanding the temporary and fleeting nature of some connections, they can nevertheless provide an important form of support at a critical time in an individual's life. Moreover, while the nature of support available through platforms such as chat rooms may not fit a conventional definition of 'social support', both Robyn and Sherrie's interviews provide strong evidence that from their perspective, the provision of companionship with 'no strings attached', and the belief that they were valued and esteemed on their own terms, could nevertheless be considered as concrete examples of social support in these women's lives.

4.4   Other Sources of Support

Although beyond the scope of this study, it should also be noted that in addition to these sources of social support, which are by definition informal in nature, some women also choose to access formal support, available through health professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists and counsellors. Such is the case with 7 of the 40 women interviewed as part of this research project. Their reasons for consulting formal services varied. While Corinne has a supportive personal network, she considers formal support a valuable additional resource. When asked who she turned to for emotional support, Corinne responded

> Well mainly my husband actually. Probably my best friend, Danielle. And then … look I don't mind saying … I'm not reticent to going to formal support.

> *Ok*

> So I will go to counselling or something like that and then girlfriends of course.

Corinne's comments echo Davidson and Packard's observations that "friendships in which the therapeutic dimensions are experienced may be useful as an adjunct to therapy" (1981, p. 504). For other women, limited family support may lead them to seek out professional help. Such is the case for 53 year old Zoe, who has recently experienced high levels of stress due to difficulties in her workplace:

> *During this period, who were you inclined to turn to for support?*

> I had a couple of very good [female] friends, and I also had a couple of very good counsellors that I sought out myself.

> *Would you ever discuss any of this with any of your siblings?*

> I do, but I'm not the one in the family that's meant to have anything wrong with them, and so they don't really want to know anything about that.

> *Do you think that's because you're the eldest?*

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Um, it's partly because I'm the eldest, but also because I took on that sort of role in the family....And so I sort of tried to shrug that off a bit when I was in my 20s, and I've done various sort of detaching things as I've gone along, but I still find it difficult, myself, to talk to my Mother or my siblings about anything that's going wrong in my life, and they find it very difficult to be there for me in those situations. (Zoe)

Yet other women sought professional counselling in situations where particular crises and events are perceived as beyond the help that can be offered by friends and family. While Apter notes that sharing experiences with others going through the same thing "can offer more immediate, practical comfort" (Apter, 1995, p. 303), for several women in this study who have recently left abusive relationships, the opportunity to share their experiences with friends or family, and access an empathic and non-judgemental source of support, is unlikely to be available. In such circumstances, professional counselling may be considered the most helpful source of support.

4.5   Conclusion

Numerous studies indicate that social support is an important element in women's lives, particularly during periods of transition such as midlife, when the 'goal posts' of everyday life are changing, and emotional support may be most needed (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, 2002, p. 398; Deeks, 2006, p. 154). Midlife women are often a primary source of support for close family members, and in turn lend support to each other through close female friendships. Although women still rely heavily on face-to-face and telephone communication to offer and exchange support, they are increasingly utilising online channels. While there is a rich body of research on social support on the Internet, apart from a few notable exceptions (Conforti, 2001; Matzko, 2002), most previous studies have tended to limit the scope of their investigation to the relatively public environments of discussion forums and online communities. Such a methodology tends to construct the Internet as a social space that is to some extent discontinuous from offline life. In contrast, by considering women's online activity within the context of their wider social networks and communication patterns, this chapter highlights the conscious and strategic choices women make when communicating in a dynamic and changing social and technological landscape.

To the degree that online communication channels have become normalised within women's social interactions, they have come to play a critical role as conduits for social support. As this research indicates, the Internet enriches opportunities available for women to enact support, both within existing personal networks of family and friends, and by facilitating the development of new networks of support through more public electronic platforms. Such increased opportunities to share support, care and empathy have positive implications for women's health and wellbeing, both during their midlife years and as they move on to the next phase of their lives.

Chapter Five

Women, Kin-keeping, and the Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Sustaining Critical Connections: A Review of the Literature

5.1   Introduction

While this research project was initially concerned with investigating midlife women's use of the Internet in the private sphere, it became evident during the interviewing process that the participants' online communication could not be considered in isolation from their overall communication practices and the relational networks within which that communication occurred. In many cases, women's online communication blends seamlessly, and often strategically, with their use of other communication options such as face-to-face, landline and mobile telephone calls, and text messages. Underlying these communication practices is the social construction of women as 'kin-keepers', wherein women overwhelmingly have responsibility for care-giving, and the maintenance of family and social connections. Increasingly, women are performing this socially designated role through the use of mediated communication technologies. This chapter therefore explores the relationship between women as kin-keepers and agents of family and social communication, and the literature that details their use of information and communication technologies within the private sphere. The chapter begins by taking a step backwards, so to speak, to consider *why* women communicate; that is, to identify those factors and issues which motivate women to connect and commune with others. To attempt an analysis of the intricacies of women's communication patterns in the absence of this background understanding risks decontextualising the participants' behaviour from the social milieu in which it takes place – a limitation apparent in much early research into the social impact of the Internet (D. Miller et al., 2004, p. 76). The discussion then leads into an investigation of the concept of kin-keeping, in terms of the social construction of women as 'kin-keepers'. This is followed by a detailed review of existing research that considers how women have appropriated a range of communication options that enables them to fulfil their role as kin-keepers, and facilitates their access to networks of social support through mediated communication channels.

5.2   Why Women Communicate: Theoretical Perspectives

As noted earlier, identifying the factors which motivate women to communicate is a vital element in understanding women's communication behaviours, and contextualising the complex web

of social networks and channels within which women communicate. This requires a slight detour from the literature on communications to consider psychological developmental theories. The following section provides a brief overview of theories of female psychosexual development which have had an enduring influence on both academic and popular constructions of female psychological development.

5.2.1 *Psychoanalytical constructions of female psychosexual development*

Undoubtedly the dominant paradigm for conceptualising women's psychological development throughout much of the Twentieth Century was developed by Sigmund Freud (Gellner, cited in Storr, 2001, p. 142). Freud's study of hysteria laid the groundwork for new understandings of gendered subjectivity and sexual identity to emerge. At the heart of Freud's theories of female psychosexual development is the proposition that as a result of the different experiences males and females go through during early childhood, they emerge from what Freud termed the Oedipal phase[33] with different outcomes that will inevitably influence their psychological and moral development. According to Freud's theory, a successful transition through the Oedipal phase requires a young girl to have made a number of difficult psychical adjustments; on becoming aware she lacks a penis, she acknowledges her inferiority; recognising her mother is similarly afflicted, the girl blames her for her own lack of a penis, and consequently rejects her mother as her primary love object, transferring her desire and love to her father, and repositioning her mother as her rival. Her wish for a penis is replaced by desire for a child, "and in the equating of penis with child, she thus resolves her penis envy and prepares to move along the course of normal femininity" (Williams, 1983, p. 31).

Thus, orthodox Freudian theory suggests the young girl passes through the Oedipal phase having internalised a very different sense of self to that of her brothers. This period is defined by, and in turn defines, her future identity; in terms of loss, envy for something she can never have, and ultimately, a "permanent sense of inferiority" (Williams, 1983, p. 31). She is, to all intents and purposes, a victim of her own biology – something that echoes Freud's famous quote, "anatomy is

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[33] In classic Freudian theory, the Oedipal phase describes the process by which young boys and girls internalise a gendered subjective position (Cranny-Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, & Kirkby, 2003, p. 50). As Cranny-Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos and Kirkby explain, "[t]he Oedipus complex describes the psychic operation of a complex of attraction, desire, love, hatred, rivalry and guilt that the child feels towards his or her parents. It takes place around the age of three to five years and explains how the child comes to identify with the same-sex parent" (p. 51). Using the male child as the norm, Freud theorised that during this period the young boy must work through conflicting alliances and emotions within the mother/father/child triad, and sublimate his infantile desires in order to develop a culturally acceptable sexual identify as an adult, in a process Freud termed the Oedipus complex (Storr, 2001, p. 33). For girls, the path through the Oedipal phase is more difficult. According to Freud, the Oedipal phase in girls is preceded by the 'phallic' phase, wherein a young girl makes the "momentous discovery which little girls are *destined* to make" (Freud, 1925, p. 20) - she notices that, unlike her brother or male friends, she does not possess a penis. Recognising that her own organ is vastly inferior to her brother's, she inevitably falls "victim to envy for the penis" (Freud, 1925, p. 20). This then is the trigger for the girl's subsequent passage through the Oedipus complex.

destiny" (cited in Horney, 1967, p. 9).[34] In particular, Freud argued that girls' failure to completely and satisfactorily resolve and eliminate the Oedipus complex has ramifications for the satisfactory development of the super-ego, which in turn limits women's potential for independent and rational thinking, and their ability to form moral judgments (Freud, 1925, p. 25).

5.2.2 Post-Freudian theories of female psychological development

Whereas Freud and his contemporaries such as Karl Abraham and Helene Deutsch focused on the intrapsychic implications of the pre-Oedipal phase in young girls' lives, post-Freudian psychoanalytic thinking shifted the focus to a study of the "psychical relations between human beings rather than the inner world of the individual subject alone" (Elliott, 1994, p. 18). Indeed, according to Storr, the "impression gained from reading Freud is that relationships with other human beings are of value only in so far as they facilitate instinctual satisfaction. There is no conception of friendship or other types of relationship as being valuable in themselves" (2001, p. 113). All are considered 'aim-inhibited' substitutes for sexual relations. Moreover, whereas traditional psychoanalysis focuses on the obstacles in the way of 'normal' female [heterosexual] development, it overlooks the relational dynamics within which that development takes place (Chodorow, 1978, p. 114). Indeed, it has been argued that the 'psychoanalytic paradigm' has pursued intrapsychic development theories at the expense of inquiry into the role of relationships in psychic development (Gergen, 2001, p. 38). As Gergen observes, "the psychoanalytic discourse diverts attention from the notion that it is the social network of people that is significant in constructing identities to that of the deep interior of the single isolated individual (K.G. Gergen, cited in Gergen, 2001, p. 38).

In contrast, the emergence of object-relations theory signalled a major shift away from traditional psychoanalytic thinking. Pioneers such as W.R.D Fairbairn, Harry Guntrip and D.W. Winnicott posited an individual's psychological development as occurring *in relation* [italics added] to other objects (Elliott, 1994, p. 22; Kahane, 1992, p. 286). As Elliott suggests, "in the object-relations perspective, the emergence of selfhood is tied to the development of interpersonal relations" (1994, p. 27). Thus, "in contrast to classical Freudianism, object relations theorists hold that human subjects want relationships with others for the intrinsic satisfaction of such connectedness" (Elliott, 1994, p. 22). Both Fairbairn and Margaret Mahler constructed psychological development as a continuum from the undifferentiated infant, whose identity is merged with the maternal 'object', through "symbiosis to separation and individuation" (Mahler, cited in Kahane, 1992, p. 286). In this,

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[34] Janeway notes this statement, which appeared in the <u>Contribution to the Psychology of Love</u> (1912), was not made in specific reference to women's psycho-sexual development, but rather referred to the fine line that exists between the primal desire for gratification and the "demands of civilization" (Janeway, 1974, p. 67). Nevertheless, there is evidence that, in some ways at least, Freud's statement reflects a biological deterministic perspective that fundamentally links psychical development with biological reproduction (Chodorow, 1978, p. 154).

object-relations theory echoes another post-Freudian psychoanalytic school of thinking. Ego psychology, as developed by Anna Freud and Erik Erikson among others, equates 'normal' psychological development with successful individuation, characterised by "a successive pattern of separations throughout the life cycle" (Elliott, 1994, p. 20).

5.2.3 *Feminist theories of female psychological development and gendered subjectivity*

The 1960's and 1970's saw a resurgent interest in women's psychology, as the women's movement was forced to confront the continuing and seemingly entrenched gender inequities in contemporary society. In particular, Nancy Chodorow's incorporation of object-relations theory into the study of the self-in-relation paved the way for the American feminist movement to re-evaluate psychoanalysis (Philipson, 1992, p. 45). In her 1978 book, The Reproduction of Mothering, Chodorow challenges traditional Freudian theory regarding the importance of the pre-Oedipal relationship between the mother and infant. For Chodorow, the significance of this early period of infantile development is that it "occurs *in relation* to another person or persons" (1978, p. 77). In describing a child's early development then, one is more holistically describing "a social and interpersonal relationship ... [rather than just] individual psychological or physiological growth" (Chodorow, p. 77).

Chodorow is particularly interested in differences in the nature of relationships between mothers[35] and daughters, and mothers and sons, and the psychical and sociological consequences of this. According to Chodorow, exclusive mothering during the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal phase generates different "psychological capacities" in males and females, which account for continuing gender role distinctions (1978, p. 7). Chodorow draws on clinical examples to argue that the pre-Oedipal relationship between a mother and daughter can be constructed as a "semisymbiotic relationship" (Hammer, cited in Chodorow, p. 109) that has major implications for the construction of gendered female personality. "Because they are the same gender as their daughters and have been girls, mothers of daughters tend not to experience these infant daughters as separate from them in the same way as do mothers of infant sons" (Chodorow, p. 109). Clinical work with mothers and adolescent daughters indicates that "elements of the preoedipal mother-daughter relationship are maintained and prolonged in both maternal and filial psyche" (Chodorow, p. 110). A study by Hammer described "how issues of primary identification, oneness, and separateness follow mother-

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[35] Chodorow qualifies the use of the term 'mother' within the context of a 'nuclear family'. She notes research which indicates that primary love need not be exclusively associated with the infant's mother; an infant may develop primary love with anyone who can provide the same "constancy and quality of care." Moreover, primary love may develop with more than one "attachment figure", as may be the case with child care or societies not based on the nuclear family, such as the Israeli kibbutzim (1978, pp. 74-75). For ease of writing in this chapter, 'mother' has been used as a generic term for the primary care-giver with whom the infant develops a primary love relationship.

daughter pairs from a daughter's earliest infancy until she is well into being a mother or even grandmother herself" (cited in Chodorow, p. 109).

According to these theoretical frames, whereas for boys the path to gendered masculinity requires a "process of disidentification" (Greenson, cited in Benjamin, 1990, p. 76) and "a more emphatic individuation" (Chodorow, 1978, p. 167) from their primary love object, concomitant with a rejection of associated relational qualities, for girls the imperative to establish an identity separate and distinct from their mother does not assume the same psychic prominence in the Oedipal phase. It is through the continuity of the primary love connection that "girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others" (Chodorow, p. 169). The centrality of relationships and the interdependence that characterises young girls' lives generates a positive orientation towards the development of relationships, or what Chodorow describes as a "basic relational stance" (p. 90), and means they develop with "a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not" (p. 167). As Chodorow argues, from a very young age, female children are psychologically and emotionally nurtured in the necessary skills required of a 'mother', by a woman who was herself 'trained' by her own mother. In contrast, young boys are directed down a different path, in preparation for a life lived largely in "nonrelational spheres" (p. 170). Consequently, males and females develop quite different relational and emotional capacities. As Chodorow suggests, "relational abilities and preoccupations have been extended in women's development and curtailed in men's" (p. 169). That is to say, while both genders can be said to have equal relational potential, current parenting practices dictate that, in general, it is in females that the qualities necessary to develop a relational orientation are more highly developed.

Apter and Josselson build upon Chodorow's theories in their analysis of female friendships, and contend that rather than viewing young girls' friendships as preparation for intimate relationships with males, as traditional psychoanalytic theory suggests, they should instead be considered as continuing the "close bond" formed with their mothers, and the beginning of "the long story of attachments to girls and women that will shape their identity and outlook throughout their lives. And, in doing so, they are learning about close relationships of all kinds" (Apter & Josselson, 1998, p. 23). Empirical support for this theoretical perspective is provided in Davidson and Packard's discussion on the therapeutic value of women's friendships. As one of their research participants noted, "my friendship capacity developed out of a close relationship with my mother" (1981, p. 507).

5.2.4   In women's experience: A new paradigm for understanding women's psychological development

More recently, feminist theorists have repositioned research into woman's psychological development, moving the focus from the analysis of her differences compared with man, to the study of her as a unique being in her own right (Williams, 1983, p. 18). Notably, the centrality of relationships and connections in women's lives is an issue that has been taken up by a number of

female practitioners over the last 30 years in an attempt to more accurately reflect their female patients' experiences. Practitioners such as Jean Baker Miller (1986) and Carol Gilligan (1982) re-evaluated the role of women's relationships in *all* human development. The relational capacities embedded in women's psychological makeup, as elucidated in Nancy Chodorow's work (1978), are positioned in Miller and Gilligan's writings as integral not only to a woman's sense of self, but are the bedrock upon which *other* individuals prosper and grow, both physically and psychologically. Embedded in women's daily practices – practices that are often overlooked or devalued in contemporary society – are complex patterns of interactions and exchange that "foster ... [other people's] development in many psychological dimensions" (J. B. Miller, 1986, xx). That women's relational work has been largely overlooked in the psychological literature is evident in the work of one of the major theorists of adult development in the Twentieth Century. Erik Erikson "theorised that we go through eight stages of ego development during our lifetimes" (Edelstein, 1999, p. 42). The major developmental task for midlife is 'generativity', which, as Erikson conceptualised it, describes the care and guidance of the next generation by mature adults. The benefits of generativity flow both ways, as the younger generation receive guidance and encouragement, and the older midlife generation are recognised for their wisdom and knowledge. Yet, as Edelstein points out, women have always been involved in the nurturing and guidance of the next generation. Indeed, Edelstein asserts that "Erikson never fully took into account just how much women care for, nurture, and guide others throughout their lives" (1999, p. 42).

Echoing Chodorow's notions of females' greater relational orientation, Miller contends that through a process of acculturation that begins perhaps even before birth, women in general develop very particular qualities and attributes that enable them to carry out the tasks and duties which their culture demands of them. According to Miller, the differentiated experiences females are immersed in from birth equip them with the skills, aptitude and appropriate psychic framework to perform 'gendered' work:

> Women do have a much greater and more refined ability to encompass others' needs and to do this with ease. By this I mean that women are better geared than men to first recognize others' needs and then to believe strongly that others' needs can be served – that they can respond to others' needs without feeling this as a detraction from their sense of identity. (J. B. Miller, 1986, p. 62)

A review of studies into sex differences in empathy and altruism appears to provide only qualified support for Miller's observations, suggesting that females' *reputation* for caring and altruism may overstate their actual helping behaviour (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Hoffman, 1977). However, a study by Hoffman suggested that while "both males and females are equally likely to be aware of another's feelings and to recognise another's perspective, emotional reaction to another's feelings is more likely to come from females" (cited in Brabeck, 1993, p. 44). Hoffman attributed this to the differentiated socialisation of males and females, which results in a caring and empathic orientation

being more highly developed in females. In contrast, Shantz (cited in Brabeck, 1993, p. 45) argues that the popular notion that "girls are more socially sensitive than boys", a notion implicit in the writing of Hoffman, Miller (1986) and Gilligan (1982), is not supported by the developmental literature.

Nevertheless, where significant statistical differences in empathy and caring have been identified, it is generally girls who exhibit the more caring and nurturing behaviour. Rejecting any notion of an inherent biological predisposition, Mussen and Eisenberg-Berg echo similar conclusions drawn by Chodorow (1978) and Hoffman:

> Girls apparently receive more affection from their mothers than boys do and are more likely to be disciplined by induction and less by power-oriented techniques ... or, as a result of training, girls may be more empathic with the needs and distress of others. Furthermore, in many cultures, helpfulness, and nurturance of others are considered more appropriate for girls than for boys; girls are therefore more frequently and more strongly rewarded for such behaviours by parents and others. (Mussen and Eisenberg-Berg, cited in Brabeck, 1993, p. 43)

It is perhaps worth noting that in most studies the methodology chosen to determine the degree of empathy and altruism may produce results which are not necessarily indicative of everyday patterns of helping and caring. As Greeno and Maccoby note, most studies rely on unobtrusive observations of people faced with a situation in which the person requiring help is a stranger. In this situation, the willingness to help may be compromised by a range of factors not related to intrinsic qualities of empathy and nurturance (1993, p. 196). If a more holistic methodology were to be employed, one that drew upon observations of everyday experiences in both the public and private spheres, then more comprehensive and generalisable findings may result. This methodology would acknowledge the caring and altruism embedded in everyday practices within the home; practices that are predominantly performed by women. Time-use surveys and studies into the household economy have consistently identified significant gender differences in the amount of unpaid work performed by men and women (Wajcman, 2004, p. 62). According to the latest available time-use statistics produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, women continue to spend more time on a variety of unpaid domestic activities such as house cleaning, laundry and cooking, than do men, and more than double the amount of time per day on child care than their male counterparts (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008a).

Moreover, historically, females have carried the burden of caring for the young, infirm or elderly family members. A US study of life-cycle transitions in women born before 1930 noted that care-giving featured prominently in the interviewees' life stories (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 189). Australian and international studies indicate that women of all ages continue to perform the bulk of unpaid care, whether that involves domestic duties or care of children or other family members (Baker, 2001, p. 172; Cahill, 1999, p. 235; Grace, 2004, p. 23). For example, research spanning

Canada, Australia and New Zealand indicates that women have retained "responsibility for 'emotional work' such as soothing frayed nerves, assisting children to build their confidence and listening to family members' troubles" (Habgood, cited in Baker, 2001, p. 171). In addition, statistical data continues to reflect the fact that notwithstanding women's active participation in the paid workforce, they are still more likely to be the person with primary responsibility for the care and wellbeing of others (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008b, p. 64; Cahill, 1999, p. 235; K. Rice, Walker, & Main, 2008, p. 5). Indeed, Australian statistics indicate that 71% of primary care-giving is performed by women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). Moreover, the "45–54 years age group contained the largest number of both male and female primary carers (32,200 and 83,400 respectively)" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, p. 11), highlighting the degree to which women in midlife are more likely to have care-giving responsibilities than other segments of the population. This care, in the form of women's unpaid labour in the home as carers of children, ageing parents and/or family members with disabilities, also extends beyond the domestic sphere to encompass voluntary labour in community and civic organisations.

At this point it is perhaps necessary to address potential accusations of constructing an argument that by default casts women as biologically *predestined* to a relational or caring orientation. Certainly therapists such as Chodorow, Miller and Gilligan have attracted criticism for the perceived essentialism, universalism, and the romanticism of 'pure womanhood' reflected in their theories. For example, Carol Stack (1993, p. 110) questions theories that claim to represent a universal 'truth' about women, while in the process ignoring cultural or ethnic differences, while others such as Linda Kerber (1993, p. 106) caution against what they perceive as a biologically determined stance that automatically equates femaleness with an inherent predisposition to a caring and relational orientation. Certainly evidence suggests women's care-giving role reflects complex social dynamics which challenge notions of a gendered predisposition to care-giving. A recent report into the impact of informal care-giving on women indicates that the greater likelihood for women to be primary care-givers is underpinned by social expectations (K. Rice et al., 2008, p. 5), while Bittman, Fast, Fisher and Thompson note that "gender roles virtually dictate women's responsibility for care" (cited in K. Rice et al., 2008, p. 5). Moreover, while the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Survey on Disability, Ageing and Carers reveals that 30% of carers believe "the caring role strengthened their relationship with the person they were caring for", this sits uncomfortably with other ABS survey findings which reveal "72.4 percent of primary carers experienced some form of physical or emotional negative effect from providing care" (cited in K. Rice et al., 2008, p. 5). Thus it is evident that while women undoubtedly perform the bulk of care-giving in contemporary western societies, the degree to which this reflects a process of gendered acculturation which promotes a greater capacity for empathy and a relational orientation among women, or whether the extent to which women's

greater responsibilities for care-giving reveal gendered roles and normative expectations, is difficult to ascertain.

And yet, to ignore women's experiences – even if those experiences are not representative of *all* women – would appear to do an equal disservice. To reject notions of growth through relationships because they fit too neatly into constricting notions of femininity would seem to dismiss the relevance and significance of those experiences, and in the process reinforce an historical tendency to undervalue women's "emotional and intellectual insights" (Brown, 1994, p. 383). In Gilligan's theory, the '*different voice*' is not exclusively representative of females, nor does it seek to represent *all* female voices. Rather, it should be read as emblematic of a way of thinking that is driven by *different* motivations and priorities than those validated in traditional psychological literature. Indeed, in exploring women's own experiences not only are the differences between women highlighted, "but also those profound and persistent commonalities which would seem to exist between women and which can form the basis of social critique" (Gray, 1992, p. 31). Thus, feminist theorists and practitioners such as Gilligan offer more nuanced and inclusive theories of development that draw on the lived experiences of both men and women. In contrast to traditional developmental theories which emphasise individuation, rationality and objectivity as central to psychological maturity and morality, feminist theories privilege the importance of relationships and connections, caring and empathy, as integral to women's sense of self. Indeed, according to Miller, "an inner sense of connection to others is the central organizing feature of ... [women's] development" (cited in J. B. Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 16). Such theories provide a useful launching pad from which to contextualise women's communication patterns and choices within the broader framework of the relationships and connections that characterise their everyday lives.

5.3   Women as 'Kin-keepers': Empirical Accounts [36]

As the first part of this chapter has discussed, the central role of relationships in women's development has only relatively recently been acknowledged in the academic and psychological literature. However, there is ample evidence that personal relationships, encompassing both familial and social, have always played a pivotal role in women's lives. Women's communion in the private sphere – the realm constituted through family, domestic and intimate relationships - reflects not only the drive for connection that underpins women's development (J. B. Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 16), but also broader social attitudes and beliefs concerning women's natural abilities and appropriate roles (Rakow, 1992, p. 33). A number of studies over the last 50 years have confirmed that women have

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[36] Parts of this section have been drawn from a refereed paper presented at the Transforming Information & Learning Conference 2006 (Dare, 2006), available online at http://conferences.scis.ecu.edu.au/TILC2007/documents/2006/tilc2006_dare.pdf

traditionally been assigned, and in turn assumed responsibility for, sustaining familial and social networks, arranging family get-togethers and maintaining links with dispersed family members (di Leonardo, 1987; Dickson, 1994; Frissen, 1995, p. 86; Helgeson, 1994; Lacohee & Anderson, 2001, p. 7; Millward, 1992; Moyal, 1992, p. 62; Rakow, 1992; Rosenthal, 1985; Telstra, 2009, September 30; Wajcman, 2004; Young & Willmott, 1962). Women are, according to Helgeson, socialised to be "kin-keepers" (Helgeson, 1994, p. 412). As discussed in Chapter Four, Young and Willmott's study of kinship and family in working class London in the 1950s provided a revealing insight into the webs of connections embedded in women's lives, and the pivotal role women played in sustaining those connections (1962). Although the purpose of their study in Bethnal Green was to explore the ramifications of policies aimed at relocating families from rundown inner city areas to new housing estates on the outskirts of London, it quickly became apparent to the authors that one of the most significant findings from their research related to the construction of the 'family' (Young & Willmott, 1962). In contrast to the prevailing belief at the time that social changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution had resulted in the atomisation of the extended family, with attendant social isolation and dislocation, Young and Willmott's study revealed that the "wider family, far from having disappeared, was still very much alive in the middle of London" (p. 12).

Of particular significance to the wellbeing of the extended family was the role of the matriarch in bringing family members together (Young & Willmott, 1962). Adopting an analogy from the computing world, the mother performed the role akin to a computer server, providing a meeting place for adult siblings, and ensuring information passed between family members. This is reflected in one of the female participant's statements: "I generally see my brothers and sisters round at Mum's....There's always one or other of my sisters round there. If anyone wants to know what's going on, they always go round to Mum's" (Powers, cited in Young & Willmott, 1962, p. 77). On the death of the family matriarch, the oldest daughter commonly took over (or was assigned) the task of sustaining family links. As one male participant commented, "Rene (the eldest sister) keeps us all closely knitted. We all look towards her and she sees that we're all right. She passes on the gen from the others" (p. 81). What is apparent from this statement, and was reinforced repeatedly in Young and Willmott's study, was the nature of relationships and communication in this community. In Bethnal Green in the early 1950s, women's communion was focused primarily on family relationships nurtured through face-to-face, highly contextualised communication. Families lived in close physical proximity to each other, and would commonly interact on a daily basis. Inter-generational family ties were close, particularly between mothers and daughters (Young & Willmott, p. 47).

More recent studies in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have made similar observations on the pivotal role women play in sustaining and enriching family and social connections (Dickson, 1994; Helgeson, 1994; Millward, 1992; Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992). As Lana Rakow suggests, "women's talk holds together the fabric of the community, building and maintaining

relationships and accomplishing important community functions" (1992, p. 34). In her study of a rural community in the United States, Rakow notes the common assumption that "women will be the more active members of a family in sustaining relationships" (p. 55). This responsibility is reflected in the nature of comments made by many of the women in Rakow's study, with one women commenting "it's supposed to be part of our job" (p. 55). Another women in the same community made the observation that "if it weren't for me, we wouldn't have continued relationships" (Rakow & Navarro, 1993, p. 154). For women, kin-keeping activities include personal visits and telephone calls, arranging birthday parties and other family get-togethers, and sending birthday and Christmas cards and letters (di Leonardo, 1987; Millward, 1992; Rakow, 1992, p. 55). According to Rakow, "the calls these women make and the letters and packages they send literally call families into existence and maintain them as a connected group" (1992, p. 64).

Women's kin-keeping activities in this context take on a service role, becoming part of the gendered job description assigned to women in contemporary western society. As di Leonardo notes, "the creation and maintenance of kin and quasi-kin networks in advanced industrial societies is *work*; and, moreover, it is largely women's work" (di Leonardo, 1987, p. 443). Similarly, Wellman and Wortley construct women as "domestic relations specialists", and contend that whereas "men fix things; women fix relationships and keep households and networks going" (1990, p. 582). Women's 'gendered work' can be constructed as the 'glue' that binds families together, facilitating opportunities for communion, and smoothing over disagreements that may arise in families. While some women may resent aspects of this kin-keeping role, particularly where there are multiple demands upon their time, for many women this "relationship work" (Spender, 1995, p. 191) is intimately associated with, indeed almost inseparable from, the communion and care-giving activities that researchers such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Jean Baker Miller (1986) suggest underpin the female psyche (Millward, 1992, p. 56; Moyal, 1992, p. 65). Indeed, according to Noddings, "many of the demands of caring are not felt as demands, but are the occasions that offer most of what makes life worth living" (cited in Woods, 1987, p. 111).[37]

While the evidence suggests many contemporary women continue to perform the role of 'kin-keeper' and 'domestic-relations specialist', the last 50 years have witnessed fundamental changes in the nature of their personal networks, and the communication tools and transport options available to them. When Young and Willmott undertook their research into kinship in the 1950s, women were largely restricted to travelling by public transport, which in turn meant that their communication and social support networks were almost entirely confined to family members and neighbours living in close proximity to each other, and nurtured through frequent, often daily, face-to-face

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[37] It should also be noted that care-giving can have significant negative impacts on women's health, social and economic status (K. Rice et al., 2008).

communication. This inherently limited the extent and nature of women's communication and social support networks (Young & Willmott, 1962). It's a very different scenario for many women today, particularly in a geographically isolated place such as Western Australia. The relatively large migrant population, coupled with a booming resources industry which attracts workers from out of state and internationally, means that there are many women who are physically separated from their traditional social and family networks. Moreover, in contrast to the women interviewed by Young and Willmott, contemporary women have available to them a range of information and communication technologies, including landline and mobile telephones, text messaging (SMS), and the Internet to manage family and social networks that may be dispersed throughout the world (Boase et al., 2006; Boneva et al., 2001; Holloway & Green, 2004). The next section of this chapter focuses on the role of ICTs in facilitating women's 'relationship work', through an examination of existing research on women's appropriation of a range of ICTs to sustain and enhance relationships. The chapter begins by outlining research that explores women's domestic consumption of the telephone.

5.4 Women's 'Relationship Work' and the Telephone – A Review of the Literature

Perhaps no other technocultural tool has been so implicated in women's 'relationship work' than the telephone. Since its introduction in the late Nineteenth Century, the telephone has been crucial in helping women overcome both physical and social isolation, and has become integral to the maintenance of relationships. Indeed, so quickly did women harness this innovative new technology to their own communication needs – quite at odds with industry forecasts that envisaged the telephone as "primarily ... an aid to commerce", that just two years after the widespread introduction of telephone exchanges in the United States (Aronson, 1977, p. 27), Mark Twain published a witty account of an overheard telephone call between two women. A Telephone Conversation describes an exchange that, with its emphasis on women's everyday practices and concerns such as child care, cooking, and beauty and healthcare, as well as what Twain refers to as 'gossip', quite likely bears an uncanny resemblance to many women's telephone conversations today. In this early account, Twain sketched the figure of the archetypical female telephone user, highlighting "her special love of the instrument and special way of using it" (Brooks, 1977, p. 211).

Twain's account is infused with negative judgments on the worth of the women's talk; a judgment that also reflected widely held views within the telecommunications industry at that time. As Marvin notes, "talkative women and their frivolous electrical conversations about inconsequential personal subjects were contrasted with the efficient, task-oriented, worldly talk of business and professional men" (cited in C. S. Fischer, 1992, p. 230). A review of the literature on social uses of the telephone reveals the enduring influence of such stereotypical construction of women's telephone talk as trivial gossip, chatter or chit-chat (Frissen, 1995, p. 80; Rakow, 1988, p. 208; Umble, 1992, p.

188), and is perhaps more revealing of "scholars' perception of women than about the telephone or women's experiences with it" (Carson, 1999). Perhaps not surprisingly, stereotypical constructions of women's telephone talk as gossip have proven to be particularly enduring, as the following comment by one of the women in this current research project indicates:

> Well there is that kind of perception because I think my Mother was a classic homemaker and my Father travelled quite a bit for work and so she was home with us and so telephone … she was pretty good on the phone and I understand now why. But Dad used to always sort of tease her a bit when he came back, and it was a bit of a way of putting her down and that sort of thing, you know? And I think we all grew up with that sense that, you know... gossip on the phone [laughter]. (Corinne)

Similar dynamics were noted in an Australian study commissioned by Telecom in the late 1980s (Moyal, 1989). As Moyal noted, the research

> disclosed a measure of tension, conflict and power play arising from some women's telephone use. A major source of tension attached to a husband's attitude to his wife's calls....Many men teased their wives or joked about time spent on the telephone and the time wastage it implied. (Moyal, 1992, p. 66)

Implicit in the dismissive and pejorative attitudes exhibited by some men (and also some women) is the notion that women's telephone talk is at best unimportant and idle chit-chat, and at worst 'gossip' (Umble, 1992, p. 189). Unfortunately, such constructions of women's telephone communication overlook the valuable 'relationship work' embedded in females' seemingly trivial telephone talk. As Frissen's review of research on gendered uses of the telephone highlights, "women's uses of the telephone appear to be strongly interwoven with these [relational] responsibilities and with their traditional strong position in the private domain" (1995, p. 86). As such, women's appropriation of the telephone strongly validates Fischer's notion that the ways that new communication technologies are adopted and used are to a large extent socially conditioned (1992).

In Lana Rakow's review of literature documenting women's use of the telephone, she reflects back upon the apparent ease with which women co-opted the telephone soon after its introduction into the domestic market in the United States in the late Nineteenth Century. As Rakow notes, women quickly adopted this new technology to perform duties considered appropriate to a woman's role: "maintaining family and social relations and home-business transactions" (1988, p. 208). Women were further encouraged to use the telephone to perform what had traditionally been considered 'women's work', by their husbands' reluctance to use, and in some cases active dislike of, this new communications technology (Rakow, 1988, p. 217). Not only are women responsible for maintaining contact with family and friends through their telephone use, but research also indicates women have been tacitly assigned the task of answering the household telephone. Frissen cites research which suggests that "in France in 80 per cent of cases women are responsible for answering the telephone" (Frissen, 1995, p. 85). In this context, the telephone is constructed as a "domestic appliance, much

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like an oven or washing machine, operated by women as an extension of their other familial responsibilities" (Rakow, 1992, p. 50).

Rakow's study of women's telephone communications in a small United States rural community confirms the pivotal role the telephone has come to play in facilitating women's communion, and the depth to which it has become embedded in the everyday rhythm of women's lives.

> The telephone ... runs like a thread through the lives of women in Prospect. Their telephone talk fits into the appropriate spheres of activity and interests designated for women. It is both 'gendered work' and 'gender work', in that it is work that women do to hold together the fabric of the community, build and maintain relationships, and accomplish important care-giving and receiving functions. It is through their care-giving work at home and their jobs that women occupy their place in society ... taking responsibility for the emotional and material needs of husbands and children, the elderly, the handicapped, the sick and the unhappy. While this role has been little recognised or valued, the caring work of women over the telephone has been even less noted. (Rakow, cited in Moyal, 1991, p. 59)

Similar observations emerged from several Australian studies conducted during the same period which examined telephone use within a domestic context (Gillard, Bow, & Wale, 1994; Moyal, 1992). Although not focused exclusively on women's use of the telephone, Gillard, Bow and Wale's study did suggest a greater reliance on the telephone by women, particularly for supporting relationships with family and friends (1994, p. 8). Similar findings emerged from a study led by Ann Moyal in the late 1980s (1989, 1992). Moyal's survey of women's telephone use documented the ways in which Australian women's use of the telephone revealed "distinctive feminine patterns of telephone use" (1992, p. 54), "in which kin-keeping, nurturing, community support, volunteer activity, and receiving care played a signal part" (1991, p. 58).[38] Moyal's study draws on Keller's (1977, p. 284) model of "instrumental" and "intrinsic" motives for telephone use; instrumental calls have a functional purpose, such as "making appointments or business arrangements, [and] seeking information and dealing with emergencies or household crises", while intrinsic calls involve "personal communication with relatives and friends, volunteer work, counselling and all intimate discussion and exchange" (Moyal, 1992, p. 53). Although later research by Fielding suggests this 'instrumental/intrinsic' binary is too simplistic, in failing to "recognise the multi functional nature of most conversations" (1992, p. 119), it nonetheless provides a useful framework within which to examine gendered patterns of telephone communication and networking. As with earlier Australian research which found that "women were more likely to use the phone for intrinsic purposes and both call and be called by friends and family more often than men" (Noble, 1987, p. 78), Moyal's research

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[38] Moyal's research is noteworthy in that it encapsulates a broad range of women's experiences from across the spectrum of Australian society. Two hundred women between 16 and 87, drawn from urban, rural and remote areas, and from a range of demographic and social backgrounds, including Aboriginal and migrant populations, were interviewed as part of this research.

identified that many women's calls reflected 'intrinsic' qualities. Noteworthy in Moyal's study was the contrasting nature of women's 'instrumental' and 'intrinsic' call patterns, with evidence suggesting 'instrumental' calls were of much shorter duration than 'intrinsic' calls, with most averaging two minutes duration. In contrast, 'intrinsic' calls were made much more frequently than 'instrumental' calls, and lasted significantly longer; the majority of survey participants indicated 'intrinsic' calls lasted between 15 and 20 minutes (1992, pp. 54-55). Thus, while Fielding's concerns on the limitations of the 'instrumental/intrinsic' binary may be justified, insofar as many calls may reflect a combination of motives, the number and protracted nature of participants' 'intrinsic' calls identified in Moyal's study suggests relational, care-giving activities continue to drive a large proportion of women's telephone use.

As presaged in Chapter Four, the telephone performs a critical role in enabling women's social support networks. Moyal's research reveals "a society in which ongoing telephone communication between female family members constitutes an important part of their support structure and contributes significantly to their sense of well-being, security and self-esteem" (1992, p. 55). Evocatively, Moyal notes that "'kinkeeping' floods the lines" (p. 55), with an overwhelming number of women highlighting the pivotal role the telephone plays "in their daily lives related to 'sustaining family relationships' and to their contact with children, parents and, less regularly, with siblings, grandchildren and the extended family" (p. 55). The notion of a social support system enacted and facilitated by telecommunications networks was clearly reflected in the participants' telephone use. Moyal suggests the communication activities undertaken by the women in the survey represent a "distinctly gendered communication process", wherein women undertook responsibility for "family contact tasks" which involved checking on sick and aged family members, young adult children recently moved out of home, and sharing the woes and delights of childrearing with siblings and parents (p. 56).

Echoing Young and Willmott's findings of the critical importance of the mother/daughter relationship, Moyal's research found social support networks most clearly evident in the nature of communication between mothers and daughters. Significantly, her research highlighted the pivotal role the telephone plays in maintaining an "intimate and caring telephone relationship across ... [women's] lives" through regular, sometimes daily, telephone calls (Moyal, 1992, p. 56). This communication becomes most pronounced at key moments in individuals' lives, such as daughters moving out of home, the birth of a new baby, or during the often isolated and challenging early childrearing years (Moyal, p. 56). Similar findings were revealed through Rakow's research. As one woman explained: "I'd call my mother, I'd get upset. They'd [the children] have fever or colic or something and I would call and see what to do....I talked to her every day as well as stopping by" (Rakow, 1992, p. 44). While Rakow's research identified long distance telephone costs as influencing many women's choices, she also noted that some women viewed the expense of long distance calls to

their grown children as an investment in their children's "emotional wellbeing" (p. 50). The importance of the telephone as a conduit for support is also reflected in one of Moyal's older participants' comments: "'You offer a forum on the telephone for listening to your children's problems'" (Moyal, 1992, p. 56). In this context, telephone conversations can convey a sense of "symbolic proximity" during times of need (Wei & Ven-Hwei, 2006, p. 57).

The telephone is also a critical tool through which midlife women extend care and companionship to their elderly parents. In particular, the telephone encourages a feeling of security for elderly women living alone, and provides a channel through which their adult children can extend care and emotional support (Haddon, 2004, p. 63; Moyal, 1989, p. 40). As with other women, the aged women in Moyal's study valued the phone for its role in facilitating contact with family members, "most frequently a daughter who kept in daily touch to find out about their health and needs and furnish the companionship of a 'chat'" (1989, p. 40). One elderly participant, whose daughter called each day from work for a quick chat, explained "Just the contact of my daughter's voice is a comfort to me ... and I look forward to this call" (p. 48). However, as Gillard et al.'s (1994) research indicated, the telephone also provides an important sense of security to the daughters of elderly parents. As one woman explained, "...like I feel a sense of relief when I've heard mum's voice ... when mum answers the phone, I think oh well she's fine I've heard her voice" (Ava, cited in Gillard et al., 1994, p. 22). Such telephone call patterns are a common occurrence for midlife women, who, as noted in Chapter Three, often find themselves at least partly responsible for their elderly parents' physical and emotional wellbeing while also perhaps managing full time work and dependent children.

For some women the 'gendered work' of maintaining relationships may be viewed as simply another task they must perform – a recognition that "family ties [carry] ... a sense of obligation" (Lacohee & Anderson, 2001, p. 18), and as such some women may find the time spent telephoning elderly parents or a parent-in-law an unwelcome intrusion on their time. Such was the case for some of Moyal's participants , who viewed the "weekly calls" they felt obliged to make to their mother-in-law on behalf of their husband as a "telephone chore" (Moyal, 1992, p. 65). But the extent to which midlife women may also benefit from this ongoing communication is hinted at by one elderly participant in Moyal's study: "Each night my daughter and I talk for half an hour by 'phone. We discuss the routine of the day, things we want to do when we meet. It helps my life entirely. It helps my daughter too" (Moyal, 1992, p. 56).

While Moyal's research indicated that intra-family care-giving represented the most common motivation for women's telephone calls, her study also confirms the important role the telephone plays in maintaining and reinforcing women's friendships (1992, p. 57). As outlined in the previous chapter, the importance of friendships in women's lives has gained increasing recognition over the past three decades, as research has highlighted the link between close and supportive personal

relationships and emotional and psychological wellbeing (House & Landis, 2003; Rubin, 1985). While personal relationships are important for both males and females, friendships appear to play a more central and defining role in women's lives (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 127), with research demonstrating that women tend to maintain larger social networks than do their male peers (C. S. Fischer & Oliker, 1983, p. 130). As the following comment implies, women's friendships can be crucial sources of nurturing and support:

> Friends mark our expectations of relationships – of their safe points and areas of danger. Friends pick us up when we fall down and help us reclaim who we are. But even more, friendships keep us warm. Each bond, or repertoire of interactions, is special to each friend, so that after an interval of separation, we catch up so quickly that we exclaim in amazement: "this is just where we left off!" The excitement, tension, fun, and pain of these relationships key us to the mysteries of human connection. They are a special form of love. (Apter & Josselson, 1998, p. 288)

At this point it is perhaps worth digressing a little to elaborate on the 'mechanics' by which women enact their friendships, not only through mediated communication technologies such as the telephone, but also through face-to-face encounters. A consistent theme in the sociological literature highlights gendered differences in the manifestation of friendships. As Lillian Rubin notes

> Generally, women's friendships with each other rest on shared intimacies, self-revelation, nurturance and emotional support....In contrast, men's relationships are marked by shared activities. What they do may differ by age and class, but that they tend to *do* rather than *be* together is undeniable" (1985, p. 61)

Similarly, Wellman and Wortley cite research which depicts women as interacting "'face-to-face' by exchanging companionship and emotional support while men interact 'side by side' by exchanging material aid" (1990, p. 576). Thus, in contrast to male friendships which tend to be enacted through shared activities such as playing sport, women's friendships are underpinned by ongoing talk; through their conversations women share their thoughts and feelings, their fears and joys. As such, talk is the central and defining feature of female friendship (Coates, 1996, p. 45).

In her study on women's talk, Jennifer Coates rejects common constructions of women's talk as gossip or trivial chit-chat, and argues instead that talk is the mechanism through which women negotiate their social environment. When asked what the women did with their friends, one of Coates' research participants replied "We don't 'DO' much of anything, we... we tend to TALK, I mean we... we... we talk'" (1996, p. 66). While this participant has some apparent difficulty in trying to pin down how her friendships work, Coates is quick to point out that "talk *is* doing. In fact, talk is a very powerful form of social action. It is through talk that we maintain or subvert existing social sturctures [sic], and through talk that we establish and maintain social relationships" (p. 67). As one of Coates' participants suggests, everyday experiences represent the "blood of life – it's out of that [that] everything serious comes... you can't separate it out, it's got to come out of the minutiae of

experiences, and our own experiences, not somebody else's" (Coates, 1996, p. 66). The ability to 'talk things over' with a friend can be fundamental to an individual's emotional wellbeing:

> Whether or not we can share our suffering with a friend may be crucial to whether we can survive our unhappiness. In talking to a friend, we may gain the assurance that our 'bad' feelings won't destroy the people close to use, that these feelings are acceptable, that they can be understood by someone else, and that someone else wants to help us weather them. (Apter & Josselson, 1998, p. 205)

The notion of ongoing conversations as fundamental to healthy relationships echoes the interpersonal communication literature, which emphasises the importance of routine interaction in maintaining relationships (Lacohee & Anderson, 2001, p. 2). Strategies for facilitating connections are central elements in relational maintenance behaviours (Finchum, 2005, p. 93). While it may be that many women prefer where possible to talk to their friends face-to-face, hectic lifestyles, competing family and work responsibilities and increasingly mobile populations mean that many women's friendships must by necessity also be sustained through mediated communication technologies.[39] In particular, the last four decades have seen the telephone become a critical tool in maintaining women's friendships (Moyal, 1992, p. 57), either as a supplement to regular face-to-face contact, or as a substitute when personal contact is not possible. Licoppe and Smoreda note that "the 'relational' mode of telephone usage is ... a particularly appropriate tool to help people keep in step with each other and find a new equilibrium between periods of absence and moments of presence" (2006, p. 306). Moreover, the intimate, private quality of a telephone call may be attractive to women who may be juggling multiple demands and struggling to find time for themselves. As Rakow suggests, "the telephone's intimacy – perhaps induced through the close relationship of the voice to the ear and the absence of other cues or distractions – is precisely part of its appeal to women who use it for maintaining relationships" (1992, p. 43).

In Fischer's social history of the telephone in American society, he draws attention to academic debate which suggests the telephone is a tool through which women's oppression and subservience is reinforced. In this scenario, the telephone fits neatly within a social construct of women as "social secretaries", performing the gendered work of 'domestic relations specialist' (C. S. Fischer, 1992, p. 235). And yet, empirical evidence demonstrates that women derive much pleasure, comfort and support through their use of the telephone. As Fischer concludes, "from the first decades of the Twentieth Century women used the telephone, and used it often, to pursue what *they*, rather than men, wanted: conversation" (1992, p. 235). Indeed, the ways in which women have leveraged the telephone in pursuit of their own needs and desires is alluded to by Rubin:

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[39] While women are said to have a special affinity with the telephone, not all women find it a suitable substitute for face-to-face contact. Both middle-aged and older women interviewed by Lana Rakow lamented "the loss of closeness among women that characterized earlier days", when female neighbours visited each other in person, in preference to calling on the telephone (1992, p. 46).

Perhaps [there is] nothing more symbolic of this difference between them [men and women] than the telephone and the way they each use it. Few men have the kind of long conversations on the phone that so engage most women. For a man, the telephone is an instrument of communication, something to reach for to make or confirm some arrangement, to pass on a message....For [women], the phone is more than an instrument through which to pass information. It's a welcome social tool, an opportunity for a visit with a friend when none other is possible. For them, a phone call is a substitute for the face-to-face encounter that time or distance will not permit, enabling friends to sustain a close connection even when they can't see each other as much as they would wish. (Rubin, 1985, pp. 139-140)

Echoing Rubin's comments, Lacohee and Anderson's empirical analysis of domestic telephone use found significant differences in how men and women use the telephone. Male participants viewed the telephone as "primarily a tool for checking and making arrangements while women reported that it is vital to the maintenance of their social relations" (Lacohee & Anderson, 2001, p. 5). Similar gender disparities were evident in motives for calling, with the vast majority of men calling for a specific purpose, and subsequently restricting their conversation to this purpose, while an equal majority of women called someone simply to 'chat'. As one female participant noted, "I ring Anna [friend] two or three times a week, not for anything in particular, just for a chat" (Lacohee & Anderson, p. 18). Even where women made calls for specific purposes, they were more likely than men to preface their call with 'social niceties' such as 'how are you?' (Lacohee & Anderson, p. 9). Reflecting women's talk more generally, women's telephone conversations included "chatting, asking for advice, sharing experiences and seeking emotional support" (Lacohee & Anderson, p. 10). Moreover, while both men and women used the telephone to talk at length to people they saw irregularly, and thus used the telephone in lieu of face-to-face contact, women also reported long telephone conversations with people they met in person regularly, even for those "they saw ... on an almost daily basis" (Lacohee & Anderson, p. 7). In this context, women are using the telephone to create a sense of 'continuous connection' across time and space; a phenomenon described as 'connected presence'. Connected presence refers to a dynamic wherein social relationships are constructed and sustained across multiple interactions and media, such that individuals are perceived as continually connected through a "continuous conversation" (Berger and Luckmann, cited in Licoppe, 2004, p. 138).

Women also strategically used the telephone for what Lacohee and Anderson describe as 'pseudo-maintenance calls'; by leaving messages on friends' answering machines when they knew no-one was at home, women were able to simultaneously 'keep in touch', confirm the relationship, and better manage their time (2001, p. 19). While the widespread use of answering machines to filter *incoming* telephone calls in domestic situations has been documented (Haddon, 2004, p. 60), what Lacohee and Anderson's research reveals is the flip side of this practice; such practices demonstrate another way in which women consciously leverage ICTs to meet their own needs.

To Dale Spender, the telephone extends opportunities for women to connect with each other, and facilitates the development of new, potentially supportive feminine networks (1995, p. 192). Distance and immobility may no longer be an impediment to social and psychological inclusion. The degree to which the telephone can evoke a sense of connectedness through talk is reflected in the ways people speak about their telephone use. Telephone calls can help to bridge both the physical and emotional distance that might separate friends, such that women speak of 'visiting' each other through their telephone conversations (Rakow, 1992, p. 37). Similarly, the ability for telephone calls to evoke a sense of social presence and connection for older people is alluded to by a housebound participant in Kirsty Williamson's study, who spoke of having "daily 'drinks on the phone at 5 o'clock' with an elderly friend" who lived some distance away (1993, p. 17). That the telephone is a critical conduit to emotional support is also clearly demonstrated in a number of cross-cultural studies (Frissen, 1995, p. 87; Moyal, 1989, p. 24; Rakow, 1992, p. 97). In Moyal's research, older women talked about using the telephone, often on a daily basis, to 'check up' on each other. Particularly for women in crisis or transition, the telephone can provide a crucial link to support, care and empathy. As Moyal's interviews revealed

> Many respondents testified to long call durations from "30 to 45 to 60 minutes or more" with friends who, for example, had been widowed and who found telephone discussion often the only accessible communication for their grief. Women of all ages readily engaged in 'reflective listening' with friends in stress or personal need. (Moyal, 1992, p. 59)

It is apparent, then, that the telephone plays a unique role in women's lives. Since its introduction to the domestic sphere, the telephone has become an indispensible tool for women, enabling them to maintain connections with family and friends, and exchange care and support across the generations. As a personal communications medium, it provides a private space where women can talk – and listen – to each other; a place where women can share their experiences and make sense of their world. Moreover, in its ability to overcome physical and social barriers, the telephone has fundamentally "altered the shape of women's geographical and social space" (Rakow, cited in Frissen, 1995, p. 87). The following section continues to explore the concept of technology and social space by considering literature related to women's appropriation of mobile telephones.

5.5 Women, 'Relationship Work', and the Mobile Telephone – a Review of the Literature

While studies such as Ann Moyal's and Lana Rakow's were concerned with women's appropriation of landline telephones, there is evidence to suggest that the rapid adoption of mobile

phones[40] has provided another channel through which women enact their care-giving responsibilities. To some extent women's appropriation of mobile phones serves to validate Frissen's prophetic comment, written over 10 years ago, that "the potential uses of new telephone services will be heavily influenced by the uses of the 'plain old telephone'" (1995, p. 80). As with the adoption of the telephone into domestic situations at the end of the Nineteenth Century, there is anecdotal and empirical evidence indicating that the mobile phone has been appropriated by women in ways that are quite at odds with early industry predictions that positioned it as an aid to business (Forrester, cited in Staples, 1996, p. 24), but which not surprisingly reflect the social realities for many women. A range of studies from the early 1990s have documented women's appropriation of this 'business' tool to enable them to maintain a more continuous and timely connection with their family and friends (Rakow & Navarro, 1993; Wale & Gillard, 1994, p. 68; Wei & Ven-Hwei, 2006). In an early study Lana Rakow and Vija Navarro (1993) documented mobile phone use among 19 women. While in many cases men had persuaded their wives to carry a mobile phone for safety and security reasons, particularly when women were travelling alone in the car, it didn't take women long to recognise the true value of this new communication tool lay in its role in enabling them to maintain contact with their children, and thus facilitate a dynamic of "remote mothering" (Rakow & Navarro, 1993, p. 144) even when the women were physically absent. This attitude is summed up by the following comment by one participant: "I just feel better knowing that if they need me I'm available *all* the time" (p. 153). The notion of remote mothering is illustrated in another of Rakow and Navarro's participant's story of being caught up in traffic when her children arrived home from school to an empty house. Despite still being some distance from home, through her mobile phone she was able to care for her children 'remotely': "This was security for them but it was also security for me since they'd never been home alone before" (p. 153).

Rakow and Navarro's study of "remote mothering" (1993, p. 144) facilitated through mobile phones led them to coin the term "parallel shift"[41] to describe the phenomenon of women managing work commitments while simultaneously juggling the demands of parenthood (p. 153). When used in this way, the mobile phone, far from challenging gendered patterns of responsibilities, in many ways further reinforces socially sanctioned gendered responsibilities. The degree to which new technologies

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[40] Throughout this thesis the term 'mobile phone' is used inclusively to describe mobile, cellular and wireless telephones.

[41] In their use of the term 'parallel shift', Rakow and Navarro draw attention to the changing nature of women's work and family responsibilities that have emerged as a result of the mobile phone. They note Arlie Hochschild's concept of the 'second shift' to describe the unpaid labour women perform in the home after they finish their paid work, and suggest that the mobile phone is contributing to a situation where women are now also performing a "parallel shift" wherein paid work must now be performed while also juggling parenting responsibilities (Rakow & Navarro, 1993, p. 153)

tend to be appropriated in ways that fit within existing family dynamics is alluded to by Wale and Gillard in their analysis of the impact of new telecommunications services on family relationships:

> The introduction of a new technology into the home doesn't challenge their existing ways of relating to each other. It becomes part of their everyday routines....It doesn't challenge who does the dishes, who takes charge of child care, and who takes out the rubbish....In fact it is more likely to reinforce the family's values and activities. (Wale & Gillard, 1994, para. Families resist major change)

Echoing Rakow and Navarro's findings on women's adoption of mobile phones to help them carry out their care-giving activities even while they are physically absent, Wale and Gillard's research led them to suggest that "mobile phones did not make fathers into caregivers during the day. In the hands of mothers, mobiles extended what was already a clearly defined responsibility" (1994, para. Mobile phones). Recent research suggests that over a decade after Rakow and Navarro's (1993) and Wale and Gillard's (1994) studies, these gendered patterns of use continue to define women's mobile phone practices (Tracy Kennedy & Wellman, 2007, p. 654; Palen & Hughes, 2007). Palen and Hughes' 2005 study of primary care-giving parents' mobile phone use indicates that patterns of mobile phone use that were emerging in Rakow and Navarro's 1993 study have in the intervening years become entrenched social practices and beliefs. As the authors note, "the only times they [participants] were without their phones were when they were in the presence of their children" (Palen & Hughes, 2007). Parents' unbridled enthusiasm for this communication tool, and the degree to which this technology has become embedded in 'responsible' parenting/mothering practices is reflected by several participants' comments: "I can't be a mom and not have a phone", and "I'm a mom. There is no better toy for a mom to be able to keep track of everybody" (Palen & Hughes, 2007).

Similar evidence of the extent to which mobile phones have become indispensable to parenting practices is suggested by recent research conducted with New South Wales' school children aged 11 to 15 years old, which found that "between 66 and 82 per cent" had their own mobile (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2009, p. 1). However, in contrast to studies which have limited their analysis to parents' use of mobile phones (Palen & Hughes, 2007; Rakow & Navarro, 1993; Uy-Tioco, 2007) the NSW study provides a slightly different perspective on the role mobile telephones play in families with children, by investigating children's and teenagers' views on their mobile phone use. While this study confirmed that the ability for parents to reach their children when necessary fosters a mutual sense of security (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, p. 3), interviews with children and teenagers also highlighted that the mobile telephone is a critical tool through which young people acquire increasing levels of autonomy:

> The purpose is not so much to extend parental control over the situations children and young people find themselves in, but rather to extend the child's or young person's control of the situations they find themselves in: to better enable the child or young person to navigate and manage their own lives. (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2009, p. 3)

As noted already, women's use of the mobile phone for remote mothering purposes has in many ways reinforced women's care-giving responsibilities. However, gendered communication practices are also evident in discourse analysis of men's and women's text messages. A recent study noted statistically significant differences in both the length and the content of messages (Yates & Lockley, 2008). The study revealed that the longest text messages were between women, while conversely the shortest were between men. The significance of these differences, according to Yates and Lockley, is not simply that women tend to write longer messages than men – which might be accounted for by a number of variables, such as available time and specific purpose of message – but rather that the differences in message length are indicative of underlying gendered forms of communication. As the authors note

> For a woman to send curt and factual messages to a female friend would inherently threaten the ongoing relationship either during the interaction or at the next point of face-to-face interaction. Conversely, for a man to send another man a long message including the opening and closing comments, elements and socioemotional content of a typically woman-woman interaction would again raise issues for the relationship. (Yates & Lockley, 2008, p. 86)

The study found that female participants were more than twice as likely to include supportive content in their text messages as males, while almost half of all text messages written by women included elements of affection. In contrast, only 17% of men's messages contained affectionate content. The findings of this study raise several issues pertinent to an analysis of women's use of mobile telephones and text messaging. Firstly, despite the opportunities text messaging offers to 'streamline' communication to short, straight-to-the-point messages, it is apparent that gendered communication practices continue to shape at least some women's use of this relatively new technology. Secondly, the degree to which women's text messages are embedded with socioemotional content is not only an indication of gendered communication practices, but also reflects women's socially sanctioned roles as care-giver and nurturer, both to each other as well as to others.[42]

Continuing this theme, a range of cross-cultural studies highlight the many ways in which mobile telecommunication has been co-opted into women's 'relationship work'. For example, Sadie Plant's study of the social impact of the mobile phone indicated that despite cultural differences, women from a range of different backgrounds have adopted the mobile phone for kin-keeping activities: "A Thai girl working in Bangkok uses her mobile to keep in touch with her family in a remote village upcountry. A Filipina cook in Hong Kong users hers to contact her children in Manilla" (Plant, 2001, p. 58). Horst and Miller's account of mobile phone use in Jamaica found that

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[42] While this current research indicates that women do use text messaging to convey messages of care and support, many women are also comfortable sending short, succinct messages, which do not contain socioemotional content or the 'social niceties' that are a characteristic of traditional telephone calls. The women interviewed did not raise the issue of offending recipients with brief, 'factual' messages; participant's use of mobile telephones and text messaging will be considered in detail in Chapter Six.

the introduction of cheap phonecards prompted "a fundamental change in the relationship between parents and children" as parents working overseas were more easily able to contact their children:

> Many of the schoolchildren we interviewed waited with great anticipation for the weekly call from their father or mother, noting how they sometimes saved their lunch money just to hear their parent's voice. This allowed for much more involvement of parents in their children's intellectual and emotional development. One schoolgirl talked about how she called her mother for encouragement before her upcoming examinations and later updated her on the results. (Horst & Miller, 2006, pp. 87-88)

On a similar note, and effectively reconfiguring Rakow and Navarro's notions of 'parallel shifts' and 'remote mothering' within a transnational context, Uy-Tioco's research documents how Filipina mothers working overseas rely upon the mobile phone to maintain relationships with their children despite being separated by many thousands of kilometres. For these women, the mobile phone represents a channel through which "real-time and constant communication" can bridge the distance "between mothers and children separated by time and space" (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p. 256). Reflective of the popularity of text messaging in the Philippines, text messaging forms the backbone of communication between women working overseas and their families at home.[43]

> Through text messaging, mothers in far away countries are able to 'mother' their kids by asking them how their day was and whether school went ok, reminding them to eat dinner and do their homework, and bidding them goodnight almost as if they were there. (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p. 259)

The extent to which mobile phones enable Filipina mothers a presence within their children's lives is illustrated in Uy-Tioco's conversation with Donna, a nanny working in New York who has three teenage sons living with her husband in the Philippines. During their conversation, Donna was also involved in a 'texting conversation' with one of her sons. As she explained

> This crazy son of mine is asking me permission to borrow the car. He sends me a text saying that his dad says its [sic] okay and to just let me know. But my husband texted me to tell me that he told our son that we would still talk about it. (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p. 260)

As this comment highlights, Filipina women such as Donna are using mobile phone technology to successfully bridge the physical and emotional distance between themselves and their families, and to enable them to perform their maternal role remotely. "This is what Pertierra calls an 'absent presence', where cell phones are used not only to connect but also mediate and shape relationships'. Those apart are able to maintain presence and build associations despite physical

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[43] While Uy-Tioco notes that the low cost of text messaging is an important factor in the popularity of text messaging in the Philippines, she suggests pre-existing Filipino cultural and social practices have also played a large part in encouraging this form of communication. These practices include "the importance of family, the concept of *hiya* (loosely translated as shyness or embarrassment), and the need to be in the know" (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p. 257). Thus text messaging can be seen to fit well with the specific economic, cultural and social circumstances in contemporary Filipino society.

distance" (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p. 259). This practice also echoes to a certain extent Licoppe's concept of 'connected presence', wherein social relationships are enacted through multiple conversations mediated across multiple media (2004, p. 138). Significantly, whereas the women involved in Rakow and Navarro's study used the mobile phone most often as a back-up strategy when they were out of the home and temporarily away from the landline telephone, for Uy-Tioco's participants, the mobile phone has become *the* critical channel through which they sustain ongoing and meaningful relationships with their partner and children. For these women, mothering is enacted through multiple text messages exchanged between mother and child on a daily basis. It is through these messages, conveying not only the important or noteworthy events, but also the mundane, trivial and inconsequential matters that make up everyday life, that these women sustain an intimate and constant presence in their family's life.

While Uy-Tioco's (2007) and Plant's (2001) research document the use of mobile phones to sustain connections where regular face-to-face communication is not possible, recent research confirms the continuing importance of mobile phones even for families who live together. A US survey reveals that the mobile phone is the most popular communication tool used by couples to connect with each other throughout the day, with "one in five married adults (21%) say[ing] they contact their spouse several times a day using a cell phone, and an additional 26% do[ing] so at least once a day" (Tracey Kennedy et al., 2008, p. 21). Respondents to the survey indicated the purpose of their calls was predominantly to "just say hello and chat", while coordinating routines and schedules was also a common reason. Significantly, while 47% of married couples make voice calls at least once a day to their partner using their mobile telephone, just 8% send text messages to them (p. 21). In this context, couples are using mobile telephones to sustain a sense of ongoing, or 'continuous connection', rather than using them simply as a tool to exchange information.

As is apparent from the research outlined in this chapter, women have eagerly appropriated both the landline and mobile phone to manage and sustain key relationships in their lives. Perhaps not surprisingly, the dynamic feminine practices enacted through the telephone appear to some extent to have been replicated through women's activities on the Internet. The following section examines the literature in this field in more detail.

5.6   Women, 'Relationship Work' and the Internet – a Review of the Literature

In her 1995 book <u>Nattering on the Net</u>, Dale Spender urged women to value the computer for its ability to connect people, rather than just for its capacity to manage data. By positioning the computer as analogous to an "enhanced telephone" (1995, p. xvii), Spender aimed to redefine the computer as a tool for communication, ideally suited to women's needs and values, rather than a technological machine more aligned to masculine domains of work and business.

Women will be drawn in through an emphasis on the communication potential of the computer. Once women can see that it is dead easy to natter on the net – to reach people all around the world, to consult bulletin boards, to 'meet' in cafes and houses and art galleries without leaving home – there will be no stopping them. (Spender, 1995, p. 192)

The question of whether women today have embraced Spender's vision is a central concern of this research project. As such, it draws upon an expanding body of research which documents the increasing importance of the Internet as a communications tool to sustain and enhance familial and social relationships. However, in line with a number of other studies examining women's online communication (Boase et al., 2006; Boneva et al., 2001; Fallows, 2005; Holloway & Green, 2004; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 18), the findings of this current research indicate women's use of the Internet is far more strategic and task-oriented than Spender's more expansive vision. Indeed, there is a hint of irony in that while Spender was envisaging women's 'natterings' would extend through a diverse range of online environments – thus expanding the opportunities for new connections - in reality women's online activities are predominantly focused on existing familial and social connections. That is, whilst the Internet offers the potential to expand personal connections by tapping into a "cyber-community" (Spender, 1995, xxv), many women's online communication networks closely parallel their traditional telephone links. As such, it would appear that many women's Internet practices conform to traditionally gendered 'kin-keeping' activities previously enacted over the telephone (Boneva et al., 2001; Holloway & Green, 2004).

5.6.1 *Women, email and networked connections*

Both quantitative and qualitative studies into Internet usage indicate one of the most striking differences between men's and women's use of the Internet relates to their use of email. These studies have found that while email is the most popular online activity for both men and women (Fallows, 2005, p. 18), the motivations for using email appear to be quite different, with women valuing email as a tool to enhance relational and social communication significantly more so than men (Boneva et al., 2001; Fallows, 2005, p. 12; Holloway & Green, 2004; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 18). It appears that just as women over a hundred years earlier had appropriated the new technology of the telephone to perform traditional gendered 'relationship work', so too have contemporary women co-opted email to sustain family and social relationships:

Our study shows that some preexisting differences between men and women are being perpetuated in e-mail communication. For example, women in the United States have been traditionally responsible for maintaining relationships between family and friends, and we find that they have appropriated e-mail as a new tool for this traditional role obligation. (Boneva et al., 2001, p. 546)

Similar evidence emerged from an Australian study into the domestic consumption of the Internet, which draws on Spender's imagery in suggesting that "women...are nattering on the net,

especially through their email accounts. They are using these natterings to keep in contact, and socialise, with family and friends" (Holloway & Green, 2004).

Research over the last five to ten years into the social implications of the Internet has demonstrated its increasing importance as a communications tool to sustain existing familial and social relationships, at both the local and geographically dispersed level. These findings stand in stark contrast to many early predictions, which focused almost exclusively on the potential the Internet offered to facilitate new connections (Baym, 2002, p. 69). In particular, research indicates women are more likely than men to feel that the use of email has helped to strengthen family and social relationships, and improved their awareness of family members' lives (Fallows, 2005, p. 20). Studies by both Boneva, Kraut and Frohlich (2001, p. 539) and The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2000, p. 23) suggest that women are using email to communicate with siblings and parents, while Holloway and Green's study found that email represented an important communication tool for mothers to maintain contact with children who had left home (2004). An in-depth qualitative study of women's relational use of email found that women are using email to fulfil a range of communicative and relational goals (Matzko, 2002). These ranged from what Matzko calls "quick and dirty" messages sent to coordinate activities, to emails exchanged with local friends and family which served to "fill in the gaps" or "follow up on a conversation" in between face-to-face or telephone conversations, through to maintaining, and in some cases reconnecting with geographically dispersed family and friends (p. 50). Indeed, the ability to maintain a connection with "geographically distant family and friends" was perceived by the women in Matzko's research to be one of the main benefits of email. Significantly, one-third of the women indicated that without email these relationships were likely to have lapsed (Matzko, p. 50).

It is apparent, therefore, that despite early concerns that the Internet would negatively impact on social interaction and community ties (Boase et al., 2006, p. 1), women are using the Internet, and email in particular, as an extra communication tool to sustain, and in some cases enhance, family and social relationships, rather than as a substitute or replacement for other forms of communication. Indeed, a range of international studies have confirmed that "Internet communication complements real world relations" (Rice, cited in Haddon, 2004, p. 79). As with the landline and mobile phone, for many women email has become normalised as part of a repertoire of communication tools.

The importance of the Internet to contemporary western communication patterns is reflected in studies which indicate that it has become "integrated so deeply into users' lives that it is changing the communications style in many families" (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 20). Evidence suggests that use of the Internet, and particularly email, facilitates new, additional links between family members "that might not otherwise occur" (Pew Internet and American Life Project, p. 23). United States' studies suggest email use within families leads to increased levels of interaction between family members, and may be particularly useful in fostering increased communication

between siblings (Boneva et al., 2001; Pew Internet and American Life Project, p. 23). Similarly, a large Western Australian study of 'transnational' families indicates that the introduction of email has had positive benefits for families, both in terms of increasing the overall quantity and quality of communication, and also by increasing the number of family members participating in that communication (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 120). In the process, family communication networks are being fundamentally reshaped.

For past generations, family communication, particularly in families whose members had been dispersed through migration, took place predominantly through the exchange of letters. While their frequency varied, in general it appears letters arrived at fortnightly, monthly or longer intervals. As one of the participants in Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding's research reflected, "they were always fabulous letters, but I mean you could be waiting six months for one" (cited in Wilding, 2006, p. 130). The plummeting costs of international telephone calls in the 1980s substantially altered patterns of communication for transnational families (Vertovec, 2004, p. 220), with many families settling into a routine of weekly telephone calls (Wilding, p. 130). However, while the shift to communication predominantly through telephone calls increased the frequency with which families communicated, one of the other consequences was the development of a more centralised 'hub' of information distribution. Reflecting gendered kin-keeping obligations, generally the mother acted as the central hub through which family information was distributed (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 118). The subsequent introduction of email into these family communication networks challenges this centralised model, and offers an opportunity for a much more egalitarian pattern of communication to emerge. Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding sum up these changing communication dynamics:

> The shift from letters to telephone calls has an important consequence for the management of information in this network. While a letter might be passed around an entire family network, for each person to read for themselves, a telephone call has no such record that might be replayed on numerous occasions. Rather, it is up to the parent to interpret the news of the migrant and translate it during subsequent conversations with other kin....[In contrast], emails and faxes tend not to produce a hub style of network. Instead, they usually give rise to an all-channel or distributed network....This style of network has the effect of increasing both the quantity of communications and the number of people involved in communicating. When families use email, in particular, we found that children of the migrants in Australia were more often encouraged to maintain their own contact with cousins and other kin in the home country. In the home country, much wider networks of kin (including nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, siblings and cousins) are included directly in the regular exchanges of information, along with greater numbers of quasi-kin, friends and acquaintances....Otherwise silent members of the family - especially brothers, sons, grandchildren and cousins - use email to communicate across distance when they would not normally have participated in the routine exchange of telephone calls or letters (Baldassar et al., 2007, pp. 119-120)

While Baldassar et al's (2007) research presents an optimistic view of networked family communication facilitated through online channels, the authors caution that there are still gender

disparities in who performs 'relationship work'. As they note, "some parents are grateful that their daughters-in-law maintain contact, as their sons are inexpert or disinterested in this aspect of kinwork, whereas we did not encounter any examples of the reverse, when sons-in-law undertake this responsibility for their wives" (p. 121).

In addition to enhancing family networks, email has also been found to be instrumental in maintaining ties within large social networks, due to the "flexible interaction" it facilitates (Boase et al., 2006, p. 17). The asynchronous nature of email communication not only provides users with more temporal flexibility with regards to sending and responding to messages, but larger networks are more easily connected through group emails that allow participants to share their thoughts with others in a timely manner. Many women in particular find email to be a convenient, time-effective form of communication, with an Australian study finding that "there seems to be a general perception among women with domestic Internet access that email is more effective and efficient than the telephone (which is rather costly), and letter writing (which is too slow)" (Holloway & Green, 2004). Likewise, a US study found that over 60% of female respondents valued email because it allowed them to maintain contact with relatives and friends "without having to spend so much time talking to them" (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 8). Several studies have also revealed that women appreciate the non-intrusive nature of email; the ability to send a message without impinging on the receiver's time or interrupting their work is seen as a key advantage of email over telephone calls (Matzko, 2002, p. 51). Given that "women tend to maintain larger personal networks than men" (Holloway & Green, 2004), it is perhaps not surprising they value the convenience of email communication. For many women faced with multiple demands upon their time, email communication provides the opportunity to sustain family and social connections through messages that, although quick to write and send, are nevertheless embedded with expressions of "companionship and social support" (Boneva et al., 2001). There is also evidence that email not only sustains large social networks, but also has a positive effect on the size and health of social networks. According to Franzen "Internet users are, on average, not socially isolated but quite to the contrary a relatively socially active group [and] ... larger social networks lead to greater e-mail contacts which in turn generates larger networks" (cited in R. E. Rice, 2002, p. 122).

5.6.2 *Prefabricated email messages: Alternative and additional pathways for managing relationships*

Apart from conventional email communication, used either to coordinate joint activities, exchange information or express support, other forms of email communication can also engender social connection between female social networks. Boneva, Kraut and Frohlich's (2001) account of how email is used to manage personal relationships includes a discussion on a particular category of email they describe as 'boilerplate messages'. According to the authors, "boilerplate messages include jokes, stories, sayings, greeting cards, pointers to music sites, and other prefabricated messages copied

by the sender from one source and then forwarded, often to more than one recipient" (p. 542). While there is ample evidence, both anecdotal and research-based, to suggest such prefabricated email messages are a particularly unpopular element of the Internet for a large number of Internet users (Kibby, 2005, p. 770), there is also evidence that in some circumstances they perform a useful social function. Boneva et al highlight the personal social benefits that can accrue from this form of communication, noting that "like conventional greeting cards, these boilerplate messages serve to remind partners of each other's existence and, as such, preserve a relationship as a potential resource for companionship, advice, or social support at some later time" (p. 542). On a similar note, Holloway and Green suggest the significance of this form of communication lies also in the ability of shared and circulated emails to "consolidate friendships further and build cohesion between friends through reiteration and sharing enjoyment of mutual interests and sensibilities" (2004). As such, "the content is not as important as the fact that it is sent. It is sent to confirm a social tie" (Johnsen, 2003, p. 166).

However, there can be a fine line between these emails being perceived as welcome reminders of a relationship, and such emails being viewed as irritating, time-wasting messages that devalue the friendship. This sentiment is reflected in an interviewee's remark in Kibby's study: "Some people seem to rely solely on 'forwards' as the way they communicate. It's as if they think sending a forward once in a while constitutes a real relationship" (Kibby, 2005, p. 787). Indeed it could be argued that there are parallels between the articulation of social networks through the indiscriminate circulation of prefabricated emails to multiple friends and acquaintances, and the process of 'friending' on social network sites such as MySpace, wherein the notion of a 'friend' may challenge traditional constructions of friendship by including acquaintances, music bands and 'cool' strangers (d. boyd, 2006). Furthermore, chain emails, which include a message requesting the email be returned to the sender as well as forwarded on to other friends, bear a striking similarity with online 'friending', in that they make visible an individual's social networks.[44]

5.6.3 *Women's participation in social networking environments*

While email remains the major online conduit through which women perform 'relationship work', it is worth noting that relationships are also actively sustained, and in some cases re-activated or initiated, in a variety of other online environments. Internet forums such as discussion lists and electronic mailing lists, as well as online support sites, instant messaging services (IM), chat rooms, social networking sites, online dating services and 'Web 2.0' applications such as Flickr which host online communities, all provide opportunities for women to connect with existing social networks, or establish new connections. A more detailed analysis of midlife women's engagement with some of

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[44] Parts of this discussion on prefabricated email messages first appeared in a paper presented at the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (CSAA) 2007 Conference, held in Adelaide, South Australia, in December 2007.

these online environments is included in Chapter Six. However, the recent increase in the number of adults using social networking sites (SNS)[45] such as Facebook and MySpace (Lenhart, 2009, p. 1; Telstra, 2009, September 30) suggests that these particular online environments are likely, at least for the next few years, to become a more common platform through which some women will maintain relationships.

Social networking sites – and particularly children and young adults' engagement with these sites - have been the subject of intense interest in both the popular media and the research community (Lenhart, 2009, p. 1; Ofcom, 2008, p. 17). Of particular concern to both the media and researchers are the ways in which young people are using social networking technologies to construct and perform identity, maintain core social networks, and in some cases extend their circle of 'friends' beyond their known social network. The large number of academic papers devoted to young people's appropriation of SNS (d. boyd, 2007; Holland & Harpin, 2008; Larsen, 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007) have unfortunately served to draw the focus away from other users that may be active in these environments. Certainly there is a dearth of research documenting adults and SNS, despite the fact that there is a growing body of both anecdotal and empirical evidence to suggest that not only are SNS becoming increasingly popular with older people, but that to some extent, adults were at the forefront of the social networking phenomenon through early models such as Classmates.com[46] and Friends Reunited. The extent to which these sites are now considered the province of older technological 'luddites' is suggested by several posts on a consumer technology blog:

> You'll never catch anyone under 50 bothering with it but to the elderly and the internet-fearful, Friends Reunited is safe. It even has 'safe' in nice, easy to read, big letters next to their applications, one of which is bingo. Need I say any more? (Sung, 2008, April 29)

> Have you considered creating a service 'Enemies Re-united'? It might be more fun than the current bunch of old geezers talking about the good old days when you could buy a pint of oysters and still go home with enough change for a prostitute trouser-press etc. (Pelagian, 2008, June 22)

Apart from an ageist perspective, embedded in these posts is the implicit message that older users of these sites do little more than reminisce about the 'good old days'. While there may be some

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[45] Definitions of 'social networking' appear to be contested terrain in the academic literature. For boyd and Ellison, the term 'social networking' places undue emphasis on the process of actively initiating relationships, and as such is not an appropriate definition to describe the bulk of activity on these sites (2007). They suggest that the term 'social network sites' is a more useful way to define the activities that take place in such environments, with the implicit emphasis on an individual's personal network (d. boyd & Ellison, 2007). In response to boyd and Ellison, Beer argues for retaining the common term 'social networking', as it offers a more inclusive definition (Beer, 2008). For the purposes of this thesis, the term 'social networking sites' has been used.

[46] While Classmates.com was originally "a directory of school affiliates", it quickly assumed the functionality of a SNS (d. boyd & Ellison, 2007).

truth to this claim, it could be argued that there is little to differentiate the subjective pleasure users of Friends Reunited gain from their interactions, from the enjoyment which younger users derive from their participation on Facebook or MySpace. While newer SNS such as Facebook may provide greater functionality and a more stylish interface, the underlying motives for participation may be said to be broadly similar. Regardless of the particular site chosen, both Friends Reunited and MySpace provide a platform through which old friendships can be renewed, and current relationships maintained.[47]

According to a recent report, the "share of adult internet users who have a profile on a social networking site has more than quadrupled in the past four years - from 8% in 2005 to 35%" in December 2008" (Lenhart, 2009, p. 1). Moreover, although proportionally there are more teenagers engaging in SNS, in real terms "adults still make up the bulk of the users of these websites" (Lenhart, p. 1). Lenhart's report finds both males and females use SNS in equal numbers, but the numbers of users of both genders declines with age, with 19% of online adults between the ages of 45 and 54 having a social network profile, in comparison to the 75% of online 18-24 year olds who use SNS (p. 4). One of the possible reasons for older people's lower engagement levels with SNS relates to relevance; it may be that up until now there has not been a 'critical mass' of friends and family who are also online; the notion of 'if you build it, he will come'[48], might be more accurately translated as 'if you build the network, they might *eventually* come'. Having gone to the trouble of creating a profile, there may have been few opportunities for users to 'network'. This might be particularly the case if an individual has joined the site to network within existing relationship networks, and doesn't want to communicate with people they don't know. The demise of the early SNS SixDegrees in 2000 was blamed in part on this scenario:

> While people were already flocking to the Internet, most did not have extended networks of friends who were online. Early adopters complained that there was little to do after accepting Friend requests, and most users were not interested in meeting strangers. (d. boyd & Ellison, 2007)

Moreover, while teenagers and younger adults might have a surfeit of leisure time to spend interacting on SNS and adjusting their profile, this is unlikely to be the case for older women (and men) who are juggling families and work commitments. Internet usage statistics provide some indication of how lifecycle changes might impact on an individual's capacity to engage in online environments. Daily Internet use statistics from Israel, Italy and the United Kingdom indicate use "picks up very roughly from the age of around 50 years" (Raban & Brynin, 2006, p. 47). In Israel,

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[47] Although social networking sites also include business-oriented models such as LinkedIn, research indicates that "personal use of social networks seems to be more prevalent than professional use of networks, both in the orientation of the networks that adults choose to use as well as the reasons they give for using the applications" (Lenhart, 2009, p. 2).

[48] Drawn from a line in the feature film Field of Dreams (1989), which was possibly based on a quote said to have originated with Theodore Roosevelt.

where the changes are most marked, "daily use drops from more than 55 minutes in the 16-24 age group to less than 40 minutes in the 35-44 age group, and then rises to more than 55 minutes for the 65+ age group" (Raban & Brynin, pp. 47-48). More tellingly, daily Internet use is comparable between the 25-34 age group and the 45-54 age group, but drops sharply in the 35-44 age group. Similar usage patterns relating to the telephone are evident in the findings of a European survey conducted in 1996 (Claisse, cited in Haddon, 2004). Up until about the age of 35, females used the phone predominantly for chatting to friends. However, during the peak period of childrearing, women's telephone use altered:

> Females, whether economically active or inactive, spent less time chatting on the phone and more time organizing daily life compared to earlier. Their communications became shorter, and they managed calls to the rest of the extended family. Once the children had left home and the couple reached 60 there was a final change. With the end of working life, their children setting up home and the arrival of grandchildren, calls become more social, less about managing daily life. Since time constraints had become less strong, they were flexible and more time was available for chatting and sharing news on the phone. The phone also became a means of passing time rather than managing it. For those reaching widowhood, calls became even longer. (Claisse, cited in Haddon, 2004, p. 125)

This suggests that lifecycle stages, such as caring for dependent children, may have as much to do with lower Internet use (including SNS participation) as an individual's age, generational status, or technological literacy. Nevertheless, there is evidence that adults of all ages are now increasing their presence on a range of social networking sites (Lenhart, 2009). Given that there is very little research on adults' engagement with SNS, it is difficult to determine how they are using these sites, and what factors are motivating the recent rapid uptake by older people. Some insights are included in Lenhart's report, which finds that

> Most adults use online social networks primarily to connect with friends. Nearly nine in ten social network users (89%) say they use the networks to stay in touch with friends, and 57% say they use it to make plans with friends. As with teens, the bulk of these friend connections are with people they already know. (Lenhart, 2009, p. 6)

Certainly, the older demographics featured in sites such as Friends Reunited suggests that connecting (or reconnecting) with friends is a key motivating factor for older people's engagement with SNS. However, the focus on friendships in Lenhart's study might also reflect a methodological bias. For example, one of the survey questions asked respondents

What are the different ways you use social networking sites? Do you ever use those sites to…

a. Make new friends

b. Stay in touch with friends

c. Flirt with someone

d. Make plans with your friends

e. Make new business or professional contacts

f. Promote yourself or your work

g. Organize with other people for an event, issue or cause (Lenhart, 2009, p. 16).

This focus on friends is evident throughout the survey, and reflects the common perception that SNS are primarily a site for the articulation and enactment of friendships (d. boyd & Ellison, 2007). Of course, it is likely that in the context of social networking, the term 'friend' is used generically to refer inclusively to all relationships an individual might have in such environments. Nevertheless, the fact that there are no references at all in Lenhart's survey instrument to using SNS to connect with family denies respondents the opportunity to flag their use of such sites to connect with family members. A similar emphasis on friendship as the defining feature of social networks, and in turn social networking environments, is evident in boyd and Ellison's overview of social networking environments (d. boyd & Ellison, 2007). While communication between friends is quite possibly the most common form of interaction on SNS, the focus on friendships as constituting social networks overlooks the possibility that social networks can also encompass family members. Several of the women in this current research project have very close relationships with their sisters, and socialise with them as much as they do with their close girlfriends. Thus an exclusive focus on friendships in survey instruments risks simplifying the notion of social networks, and potentially neglects more complex patterns of SNS use. For example, there is anecdotal evidence that some women are using these sites to keep in touch with family, particularly teenage and young adult children. Assuming they are accepted as a 'friend', online environments such as <u>MySpace</u> and <u>Facebook</u> offer parents a unique window into their child's social world, in a way that no other medium can. As an example, I'm aware of one mother who discovered, through her young adult daughter changing her profile 'status' to 'single', that her daughter's long term relationship was over!

Such anecdotal evidence is now also being reflected in industry research. An indication of women's increasing use of SNS as a supplementary channel through which to connect with children is provided in a recent nationwide Australian survey of 1200 mothers conducted in August 2009. According to Telstra's <u>State of the Nation Report</u>, "it is not just mums in their 20's and 30's who are using social networking sites, 45-65 year old mums are adopting technology as a way to stay connected" (Telstra, 2009, September 30). The Report indicates that "70 per cent of Australian mums currently use social networking websites to keep in touch with their family" (Telstra). Apart from 'newsworthy' events such as changes to relationship status, the everyday information contained in SNS profiles provides another opportunity through which both parents and children can potentially develop greater insights into each others' lives. As the <u>State of the</u>

<u>Nation Report</u> indicates, "More than 47 per cent of mums aged 45-65 used social networking websites to view their children's pages" (Telstra, 2009, September 30). Such 'cross-generational pollination' has the potential for enhanced understanding and improved relationships. However, as danah boyd notes, the ability for women to participate, even if only at the fringes, in their children's social networks presents the risk of "context collisions" (d. boyd, 2006, para. Egocentric networks replace groups). While teenagers and young people may voluntarily invite their mothers or other older family members to be their 'friend', they may not fully appreciate the ramifications of revealing elements of their personal life and identity which they perhaps would normally only share with their peers. Young people generally construct their social networking 'profile' with an intended audience in mind. This audience is almost always imagined as being made up of their network of existing friends and acquaintances. As such, particular language and imagery is employed to create a desired impression among this specific audience. However, such active impression management leaves open the possibility that unintended 'messages' may be conveyed to the wider *actual* audience:

> In trying to balance different potential audiences and attract the ones that they desire, teens focus on dissuading unwanted visitors and crafting profiles that appeal to their peers, even at the expense of upsetting the audiences that they do not want. This move can be risky, especially if their profile content is upsetting to those who hold power over them, because the technology easily collapses the boundaries that allow teens to distinguish context through social group. (d. boyd, 2008, p. 146)

Moreover, while women may value the opportunities SNS provide to connect with their children, teenagers may hold very different attitudes. Findings from Telstra's <u>State of the Nation Report</u> indicate that: "Children over 16 years old are most likely to decline friend requests from their parents to avoid the embarrassment of baby photos and grammar corrections ending up on their homepage" (Telstra, 2009, September 30). Such a statement suggests that teenagers are more concerned about the potential for their mother to embarrass them 'in front of' their friends, rather than any concern they may have about their parents being exposed to content not intended for them. However, the quantitative design of this survey makes it difficult to clearly identify teenagers' attitudes towards their mother's activity as their SNS 'friend'.[49]

Of course, the potential for 'context collisions' to occur is not limited to teenagers and their parents. As one of the women in my research explained, while older women may welcome the additional communication channels social networking sites offer, they may not necessarily be impressed by things that obviously amuse their young adult children:

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[49] The Telstra research is based on a quantitative telephone survey. Data relating to the statement concerning teenager's attitudes towards their mother being their 'friend' on a SNS is most likely derived from the survey question "How willing are your children to connecting with you [sic], and having you connect with them through social networking technology?" Response options range from "My children are very willing" to "My children are not at all willing" and "Not applicable. I only have young children" (Telstra, 2009b).

I remember sitting around at a family gathering in Sydney recently and 'niece' had invited her mum to join. This was fine and mum rather liked being able to chat online with 'son' who was living and working [overseas]. However, my niece called her mum 'Mrs Deer' (they keep deers at their property). She did not like that at all and asked that her daughter take off all remarks about her as Mrs Deer. Imagine how often these things could get out of control and embarrass people? (Janette)

Finally, there is emerging evidence that even the micro-blogging SNS <u>Twitter</u> is being co-opted as a channel through which to sustain ongoing family communication:

On a more personal level, I have a kind of "ambient intimacy" ... with my family. I learn small details about the day my wife and kids are having, and am closer than I have been in years (on a day to day basis) with my one brother who tweets regularly. I learn small details that I'd never think to ask about. (O'Reilly, cited in Fox, 2008)

Such use of technology to maintain an almost continuous connection and presence in other's lives is reminiscent of teenagers' use of multiple short mobile telephone calls and text messages, in a process described by Ling and Yttri as "hypercoordination" (cited in Licoppe, 2004, p. 145). However, as O'Reilly's comments indicate, rather than 'tweets' having the goal of coordinating users' activities, they seem more designed to simply maintain a 'front of mind' presence within a user's social network. In the context of family communication, an increase in the quantity of communication between family members has the potential, at least insofar as O'Reilly's reflections suggest, to also enhance familiarity between family members, and perhaps in the process strengthen family connections. The issue of midlife women's experiences with SNS will be considered in more detail in the next chapter.

5.7   Conclusion

The aim in this chapter has been to provide a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to women's use of a range of ICTs. Given that the focus throughout this research project has been to situate women's communication practices in the context of their everyday lives, and reference women's ICT use against their social roles, whether they be mothers, daughters, wives, workers and/or carers, this chapter began with a brief foray into theories of psychological development. The aim here has been to highlight the meaning of relationships in women's lives, as a mechanism through which to more fully appreciate the social significance of communication technologies in women's lives. As such, the initial part of this chapter contrasts traditional notions of female psychological development which construct women as unable to successfully achieve individuation and separation from others, and as result easily swayed by emotions and irrationality, with more recent feminist theories which foreground the central role that relationships and connections play in female psychological development. The notion of relationships in women's lives has then been explored through the concept of kin-keeping. As has been demonstrated, women have traditionally performed, and in many ways continue to perform, the role of kin-keeper, maintaining

family and social relationships through their active communication and care-giving activities. Increasingly women's kin-keeping practices rely upon mediated communication technologies. This is particularly the case for women living in such a geographically isolated region as Western Australia, in which a significant proportion of the population has family and friends living interstate or overseas.

The remainder of this chapter has been dedicated to a detailed review of the literature relating to women's use of ICTs to manage and in some cases enhance family and social relationships. In particular, attention has been paid to the literature documenting women's use of the landline and mobile telephone, email, and social networking sites. The aim throughout this chapter has been to provide a theoretical and empirical background for the next chapter, which will detail the findings of this current research project. This will be done by providing evidence of how a specific group of Western Australia women have appropriated multiple ICTs, as well as drawing attention to the implications this ICT use has for their family and social relationships, and their sense of well-being during their midlife years.

Chapter Six

Mediating Relationships: Women's use of ICTs in the Management of Relationships: Current Findings

6.1   Introduction

As has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, significant research over the last 30 years has identified the critical role ICTs play in supporting and maintaining the relationships that are not only central to many women's lives, but which, through women's care-giving activities, also underpin the emotional wellbeing of so many others. Chapter Five aimed to provide a framework within which to consider contemporary women's consumption of ICTs in the context of their everyday communication practices, and their personal family and social networks. However, much of the research discussed in Chapter Five was conducted before personal Internet use had been normalised within women's everyday communication patterns. In contrast to previous generations, today's midlife women in Western Australia generally have at their disposal a much larger range of communication options. As Christian Licoppe indicates, the introduction of new modes of communication have "changed the conditions of the game", whereby the adoption of new communication tools to an individual's communication repertoire presents "new opportunities and constraints for maintaining relations distributed in more varied mediated interactions" (2004, p. 142). Running parallel with this observation is the suggestion that new communication technologies, including the Internet, may potentially displace established communication tools such as the landline telephone (Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 228). Certainly, recent research indicates that older technologies such as the landline telephone may no longer be perceived as important as they may have been a decade ago (Rasanen, 2008, p. 232). However, this trend is far from uniform across all demographic groups. As Rasanen's research revealed, older individuals are consistently more likely to "value conventional technology" in preference to new communication technologies such as mobile phones and email (p. 241).[50]

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[50] In noting that "as one would expect, older respondents value conventional technology more than younger ones" (Rasanen, 2008), Rasanen seems to imply that age alone determines an individual's capacity and desire to appreciate and use new communication technologies. A more contextualised approach might reveal that where an individual is in their life cycle can determine to a large extent their social and professional obligations and responsibilities, as well as the nature of their personal communication networks. While an adolescent's social and communication network tends to be made up predominantly of peers, older individuals are more likely to have networks which are cross-generational in nature. As such they may, through circumstances beyond their own personal preferences, rely upon conventional technologies such as landline telephones in order to maintain contact with particular network members, such as ageing parents.

Rather than displacing existing communication technologies, it is more likely that the introduction of new communication tools precipitates a 'reshuffling of the cards', as individuals negotiate a place for this new tool within their existing technological skill sets and established communication patterns. Research over the last 25 years provides strong evidence that new modes of communication are not used in isolation from existing communication options (Quan-Haase, 2007, p. 672), but rather are integrated into existing communication patterns in processes that reflect users' communication preferences, situational contexts, and established media use practices (Wale & Gillard, 1994; Wilding, 2006, p. 134). Much of this research has focused on communication choices within specific populations such as children and teenagers (Boneva et al., 2006; Lenhart et al., 2005; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2009), and university or college students (Baym et al., 2007; Cummings et al., 2006; Quan-Haase, 2007; Westmeyer, DiCioccio, & Rubin, 1998), or within particular communication contexts, such as business organisations (Connell, Mendelsohn, Robins, & Canny, 2001; R. E. Rice, 1993; Short et al., 1976; Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987), or within young adult sample groups (Dimmick et al., 2000; Utz, 2007). The emphasis on a younger demographic in these studies is perhaps indicative of the tendency for younger people to be enthusiastic adopters of new modes of communication. In this context, adolescents and young adults are constructed as 'leading the way' in their appropriation of new media (Donald & Spry, 2007; Lenhart et al., 2005, p. 107). Moreover, young people's activities in the relatively public new media spaces provided through social networking sites such as MySpace provide a rich source of information on how new communication channels may be appropriated into an individual's communication practices.

A smaller number of studies have focused on the processes of integrating new modes of communication within domestic environments, exploring how users differentiate among multiple communication options for relational maintenance purposes (Buckner & Gillham, [2003]; Ho, 2007; Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005; Wale & Gillard, 1994; Wilding, 2006). As the following statement by Licoppe suggests, these studies highlight that the introduction of new communication technologies not only occurs in relation to existing technologies, but perhaps more importantly, that new modes of communication must 'fit' within existing social networks and relationships:

> Each device is not just added to the others, nor is its use substituted for a rival use. It is the entire relational economy that is 'reworked' every time by the redistribution of the technological scene on which interpersonal sociability is played out. (Licoppe, 2004, p. 142)

Of the studies that have examined the role of ICTs in women's lives, the majority have tended to focus on women's use of specific technologies such as the Internet (Boneva et al., 2001; Conforti, 2001; Holloway & Green, 2004; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000; Shelesky, 2003) or the telephone (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992; Rakow & Navarro, 1993), in isolation from women's broader communication behaviours and social networks. However, as Licoppe implies, relationships

develop and are sustained through numerous and ongoing interactions extended across space and time, and, more importantly, conducted through multiple communication channels. "Each of these mediated interactions reactivates, reaffirms, and reconfigures the relationship" (Licoppe, 2004, p. 138).

6.2   Methodological Considerations

As noted in Chapter Two, while this research was initially designed to identify women's use of the Internet to help them manage relationships and give and receive social support, it became apparent during early interviews that limiting the focus to women's use of online communication channels would not only be logistically difficult, given that the women's conversations were peppered with references to their use of multiple modes of communication, but would also obstruct the emergence of an authentic and reflective account of women's appropriation of online communication channels, within the context of the broader range of ICTs available to them. Subsequent interviews and the proceeding data analysis consequently shifted the focus from an analysis of how *individual technologies* are used, to a consideration of how particular *relationships* are articulated and sustained through ICTs. As a result of this methodological 'fine-tuning', key findings relating to women's use of ICTs are presented in this chapter using as a guiding framework the principal relationships in women's lives. The chapter begins by outlining key theories developed to explain individual media preferences, and then considers how the women interviewed as part of this research project manage and negotiate their choices in a multimodal communications environment. This is followed by an examination of the communication practices and dynamics that emerge as women in their everyday lives strive to sustain, and in some cases enhance, relationships with their children, parents, siblings and other extended family, and friends.

6.3   Multiple Choices, Individual Experiences: Factors Influencing Women's ICT Choices

A number of theories have been developed to try and explain media choice, and throw light on the factors that influence individuals to select one communication technology over another in particular situations. These theories consider elements such as social presence, media richness, and the gratifications or utilities offered by different media. The following section provides an overview of relevant theories, and applies them to an analysis of telephone and computer-mediated communication channels in order to develop a deeper understanding of the range of issues shaping women's communication choices, particularly in relation to their 'relationship work'.

6.3.1 'Social presence' theory

An early theoretical approach to differentiated perceptions of communication media was developed by Short, Williams and Christie (1976, p. 64). 'Social Presence Theory' is described by Rice as

> the degree to which a medium is perceived as conveying the presence of the communicating participants. This social presence depends not only on words conveyed during communication but also on a range of nonverbal and verbal cues and the communication context. (1993, p. 452)

'Social presence' can be defined as the degree to which a communication media conveys to the participants a sense of 'coming together' in the liminal spaces of mediated communication channels. Perceptions of social presence influence media choices and communicative behaviour:

> Social presence is an important key to understanding person-to-person telecommunications. It varies between different media, it affects the nature of the interaction and it interacts with the purpose of the interaction to influence the medium chosen by the individual who wishes to communicate. (Short et al., 1976, p. 65)

Short et al. define the social presence of a communications medium "as a perceptual or attitudinal dimension of the user, a 'mental set' towards the medium" (1976, p. 65). As such, it should be considered a "subjective quality of the medium" (p. 66). Communication channels with high social presence are often defined as offering more cues, such as facial expressions, body posture, tone of voice and eye contact, which combine to create a more enriched and expressive message. In effect, the recipient 'feels' they are receiving the message directly from the sender, rather than mediated through the communication channel. In general, face-to-face and telephone communication are considered to convey higher levels of social presence than computer-mediated, text-based communication. This perception is reflected in a comment by a participant in this current research project. Fifty two year old Lorraine immigrated to Australia over 20 years ago, and maintains a close relationship with her sister in the UK primarily through weekly 'chatty' telephone calls: "talking to my sister, we can talk for an hour, two hours on the phone, and it's just like, you feel like they're there. With the computer, it's a little bit impersonal" (Lorraine).

6.3.2 Theories of media richness

A parallel theory of 'media richness' was developed by Daft and Lengel (1986, p. 560) to map effective organisational communication practices. The theory of media richness describes how different media have different capacities to convey information clearly and unequivocally; according to this theory face-to-face has the highest level of media richness, followed by the telephone and then written documents (Daft & Lengel, p. 560). According to Daft and Lengel, "face-to-face is the richest medium because it provides immediate feedback so that interpretation can be checked. Face-to-face also provides multiple cues via body language and tone of voice, and message content is expressed in

natural language" (1986, p. 560). 'Lean' media such as faxes and business letters provide delayed feedback and minimal cues, and tend to be used for routine information sharing and in situations where the potential for ambiguity is low. Trevino, Lengel and Daft (1987) also argue that different media carry different symbolic cues, which may bear little relation to the message content. For example, "the manager who congratulates a subordinate on 25 years of service with an electronic mail message may symbolize a lack of concern, leaving the subordinate feeling furious rather than cared about" (Trevino et al., 1987, p. 558).

6.3.3 Gratifications theory

Another theoretical perspective considers the 'gratifications' individual media offer to users which 'fit' with their particular needs and goals. Originally conceptualised in the 1940s by Cantril (Katz, Gurevitch & Haas, 1973, p. 164), gratifications theory came to prominence in the 1970s, through studies examining the ways in which the mass media are perceived as satisfying particular needs (Katz, Gurevitch & Haas, p. 164). The basis of gratifications theory, according to Katz, Gurevitch and Haas, is that "the selection of media and content, and the uses to which they are put, are considerably influenced by social role and psychological predisposition" (p. 164). More recently gratifications theory has been revisited for the electronic era by Dimmick, Kline and Stafford (2000). Gratifications, described as "the utilities that explain media choice by consumers" (Dimmick, cited in Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 230), can be considered in terms of their effectiveness in supporting personal relationships, and also in terms of the opportunities they offer users to better manage their communications. 'Sociability gratifications' encompass utilities that are considered fundamental to managing effective relationships, such as conveying care and concern and offering advice (Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 240). 'Gratification opportunities' include elements of convenience, economy and timeliness, attributed more often to media such as email than traditional communication channels such as the telephone or face-to-face (Matzko, 2002, p. 13; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 18). As Stafford, Kline and Dimmick explain, "gratification opportunities refer to the use of a particular medium in the belief that beneficial attributes of that medium allow the user to obtain gratifications more readily than other media" (1999, para. Results). Examining the gratifications and gratification opportunities offered by different media may help to explain users' communication practices, as well as focus attention on the opportunities different modes of communication offer for better managing personal relationships. For example, research suggests that where the communication goal is to extend care or sympathy, or offer companionship, then media that manifest higher sociability utilities may be more successful:

> Providing companionship ... may require the use of multiple goals and behavioural strategies that need the rich base of social-context cues provided through the telephone....Overcoming schedule and time conflicts, easily accomplished with e-mail, may not be the issues at hand when it comes to sustaining companionship. (Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 243)

6.3.4 *Telephone communication: Opportunities and constraints*

Thus, face-to-face and telephone communication may be generally considered more appropriate for conveying emotion than text-based communication channels such as email and text messages. Reflective listening, offering care and advice, or expressing sympathy are all behaviours that rely heavily upon immediate feedback, and the "continual development of verbal and nonverbal codes to aid in the nuanced composition of messages and their interpretation" (Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 242). The sense of emotional connection manifested through telephone calls is reflected in the following comment by a participant in Moyal's study: "There's a need to communicate feeling and caring: the telephone is more personal than letters. What I want to know is how my friends 'feel' and I can hear this on the telephone" (1992, p. 58). Similarly, both Singh and Ryan's research on gender and the Internet (1999, p. 26), and Matzko's research on women's relational use of email, revealed that while women regularly use email to maintain contact with friends and family, when it comes to conveying a sense of connection, the telephone is considered a far superior communications medium (2002, p. 64). Singh and Ryan suggested that these attitudes are at least in part a reflection of many women's construction of the Internet as a 'technology', in contrast to their positioning of the telephone as a communications medium: "it is interesting that none of the women we interviewed saw the telephone as a technology....Talking on the telephone was communication. The focus was not on the telephone as an instrument" (p. 17).

The important role voice plays in conveying emotion and fostering a sense of connection was a common sentiment expressed by the participants in my research, as summed up by the following comment: "I'm very much a voice person. I very much like to hear people's voices" (Felicity). Dana, a 54 year old divorced mother of two young adults, both currently living outside Western Australia, is very comfortable using a large range of ICTs, both in her work and at home. However, during a recent period when her son was suffering from depression, Dana valued the higher social presence and symbolic proximity (Wei & Ven-Hwei, 2006, p. 57) fostered through telephone calls:

> But I know my kids well enough to know when there's something wrong. When my eldest son who has been suffering from depression this year... I was making a conscious effort to ring him every week, because I needed to hear in his voice that he was ok. And I had, previous to that point I had phoned him once a fortnight, once every three weeks because I didn't want to be the overbearing parent, and when I said that to him he said to me, "Oh, I wouldn't mind if you rang me every week." And I thought, fine, fine, I will do that then....But he's ok now, he's found a lady. So now I'm leaving messages! Which is fine with me. I still ring once a week to catch up. (Dana)

For Dana, the increased frequency of telephone calls during a difficult period in her son's life can be seen as fulfilling sociability gratifications on two levels. Perhaps most importantly, the telephone provides a conduit through which she can extend love and support to her son when it is most needed, in a way that conveys an appropriate degree of warmth and concern. But the telephone also provides a level of assurance to Dana that her son is managing, in a way that other forms of

communication such as email and text messaging may not. By hearing the tone and inflection in her son's voice, Dana is better able to gauge her son's state of mind, and respond more appropriately to his concerns. Thus for both mother and son the telephone phone provides reassurance and comfort.

The degree to which the telephone is perceived as being a superior mode of communication for conveying a sense of almost physical connection without actually being present is illuminated by the reflections of another participant, Stella. As with Dana, Stella is comfortable using a range of communication channels from face-to-face through to email and text messages. Stella is a very 'no-nonsense' professional woman, whose practical approach to life is reflected in the uses of, and attitudes she displays towards, her communication choices:

> I'm really more an 'in person'... I prefer to do face-to-face. Whereas a lot of people tend to enjoy the phone, if I've got something on my mind I need to get if off my chest, then face-to-face is far better for me, you know? I feel more comfortable, whereas a lot of people don't tend to feel comfortable with that. I'm happier in that environment....As far as, if I had something major that I had to sort out, like if I had an issue with my son, I wouldn't use the email to sort the issue out. I would use the phone, or actually face to face is probably... that's more me. (Stella)

As Stella's comment suggests, on an everyday basis she is not a heavy telephone user, preferring to maintain relationships primarily through face-to-face communication where possible. However, during periods of crisis when her personal needs change, so too do her communication practices, as her telephone use increases dramatically: "My phone stuff is usually, as I said, is if I'm in crisis" (Stella). Following a traumatic relationship breakdown several years ago, Stella used multiple communication channels to seek support, but it appears the telephone was most successful in satisfying particular gratification needs. Indeed, as the following comments indicate, during periods of crisis the telephone elicits an almost visceral response from Stella:

> I relied on the phone, the Internet, everything, 'cause I was just a mess. And the phone use was extensive.

> *More so than using email?*

> Oh, yeah. Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, I could be on there [phone] for hours on end. To anybody that would listen. You know, I just really needed that.

> *During that difficult period, why did you prefer the phone?*

> 'Cause you need that verbal feedback. You need that affirmation. And you need to hear it instantly. And it needs to be physical. I mean, the written word is great, but the written word can be construed in so many different ways, whereas the voice, you can hear the inflection in somebody's voice. And you need the sympathy. You need someone to feel sorry for you. 'Cause you feel sorry for yourself. (Stella)

Similarly, following a marriage breakdown several years ago, 45 year old Hilary relied heavily upon the telephone to access emotional support, particularly with her mother living interstate. As with Stella, the telephone provided the vehicle for Hilary to 'vent' her feelings and tap into an

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immediate and nurturing source of comfort; something which, at least for Hilary, email could not provide. In this context, the content of the message is of secondary importance compared with the emotional connection and support conveyed through the medium (Wilding, 2006, p. 132):

> *How important was the telephone in helping you get through that [marriage breakdown]?*
>
> Huge, huge, yeah. Especially my parents, to my mother, I mean that was really critical. I don't think email would really have that same attraction for me. I think the telephone is more immediate, and the kind of conversation I want to have is a more personal, emotional one, you know. I think if I were trying to say something deep and meaningful and intellectual it's nicer on paper, because in some ways a phone call is more like having a take away meal, you don't think about what you say that much, you don't phrase it, you don't form it, you don't offer it in any construct that's meaningful, whereas a letter you put a lot of thought and effort into it. It's like a five course meal....In a letter, when you sit down to commit to writing your thoughts, the way you operate is totally different.
>
> *It's much more formal?*
>
> It's much more formal, it has much more content and form, but the kind of support I've needed has not been that. I just need to blabber on the phone [laughs]. (Hilary)

While it could be assumed that the telephone would be perceived as offering a level of social presence and media richness somewhere between face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication, there is some evidence that the telephone plays a unique, and in some cases superior role in interpersonal communication to face-to-face communication. As was demonstrated in Chapter Four, numerous studies support the notion that telephone communication is capable of conveying a host of emotions, despite offering fewer cues than face-to-face communication (Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 242; Moyal, 1992; Noble, 1987; Rakow, 1992). Indeed, comparative studies have found that in some circumstances the telephone may be perceived as fulfilling communication needs as effectively as face-to-face communication (Baym et al., 2007, p. 738; Westmeyer et al., 1998, p. 44). Moreover, evidence suggests that for certain communicative goals the telephone may facilitate a more expressive and open manner of communication than is generally possible in face-to-face interaction. Connel, Mendelsohn, Robins and Canny's research suggests that the slightly lower levels of social presence afforded by the telephone in comparison to face-to-face communication "allows one to relax just enough to feel comfortable, and uninhibited" (2001). Moyal's research into Australian women's telephone practices confirm the unique platform offered by the telephone: "The survey's reiterated finding, indeed, was that women talk more freely and intimately on the telephone with close friends than they do face-to-face ... and that women can reach 'greater depth in conversation on the telephone'" (1992, p. 58).

Moreover, many participants in Moyal's study found that the absence of eye contact and other physical cues in telephone communication provided an ideal platform for handling awkward, sensitive

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or emotional situations (1992, p. 66). Short et al. (1976) noted a similar phenomenon in their comparison of experiments with face-to-face discussion, closed circuit television and telephone calls. In a laboratory setting, face-to-face was perceived as having the highest degree of social presence, while the telephone was viewed as having the lowest level of social presence, compared with closed circuit television. Their results led Short et al. to suggest that "with tasks of very high intimacy, perhaps very embarrassing, personal or conflictful ones, the medium lowest in Social Presence, the telephone, would lead to more favourable evaluations than either of the other media" (p. 129).

6.3.5 *Computer-mediated communication: Opportunities and constraints*

While Short et al's experiments predated the widespread adoption of computers and the Internet, it is not unreasonable to suggest that CMC, with its perceived lower level of social presence than telephone calls, may be an appealing communication option when dealing with difficult or potentially embarrassing situations, such as where a relationship is relatively new. In these instances, email can provide the appropriate level of connection where a lack of familiarity might make face-to-face or telephone communication awkward. This reduced awkwardness in email communication was valued by a number of participants in this research study. For example, over the last few years Pat has established a connection through email with a female cousin living in Canada. When asked why she never telephoned her cousin, Pat explained

> But see I haven't seen her since we were children, so I haven't actually spoken to her ...
> 'cause we emigrated out here, so I haven't spoken to her for years and years. So I find
> it more comfortable doing it this way, through emails....Maybe I'm afraid to phone her
> in case I don't know what to say to her on the phone. (Pat)

As Pat's comments suggest, it is the perceived comfort and safety of email that makes it such a useful medium for 'feeling your way' in new relationships. The more controlled nature of email communication enables the communicants to plan their messages, eliminating any risk of either party being 'put on the spot' by an unexpected telephone call, or unanticipated content in a telephone call. Echoing similar sentiments, 53 year old Lois reflects on her use of email to 'sound' out an acquaintance with a social invitation:

> Yes, there are things that I find easier to say by email than face-to-face but they're not
> intimate things. They're probably more, I would ... probably where I see the role of the
> email that no other medium could deliver is more when you're trying to... it's almost
> like a linking sort of thing....More as a way in, where I think if I'm not quite ready to
> go and knock on someone's door and sort of you know front them about something ...
> that sounds like a confrontation, I don't mean that. More of a door opener.

> *Safer?*

> A safer sort of way of making an initial contact or perhaps flagging something that
> you're not quite sure whether they're going to be either in a position to discuss or
> happy to discuss with you or prepared to take the time to discuss with you. You know
> that sort of thing where you're feeling…

You're a bit tentative?

Mmm, a bit tentative.

About the response you might get?

Yes. Yeah. That's what I would perhaps see as being the particular role of the email. People who I don't know as well....Well for instance, here's an example. [Ex-colleague] who I got on very well with, but it was purely a professional relationship, and then after I'd left there something came up that I thought ... oh she'd really like to come to this. But I just wasn't sure whether I could ring her up or whether she'd think, 'oh that's funny, why's she ringing me?' And if she didn't want to [come] she couldn't say no without it being awkward. So I thought I'll just send her an email and I'll just say "Oh you know, this is happening and you know if you're [free]" ... then I thought if she's not interested she doesn't have to say yes, make up an excuse or anything else, she can just email back and say "Oh no I'm busy", you know whatever. Yeah, that sort of thing....Yeah, more diplomatic, where I think I don't have to put myself on the line and they don't have to be embarrassed ... about saying no, and then once you've established that it's safe to take something to the next level then the phone call's fine. (Lois)

In other situations, email can offer a safe environment in which to manage difficult or tense situations. For Zoe, difficult relationships are managed more easily through email communication than telephone conversations: "depending on what stage our friendship or relationship was at the time I might think twice about ringing" (Zoe). In such situations, the mediated nature of CMC provides both a physical and temporal buffer. Another participant, Robyn, found that email provided an appropriate channel to re-establish contact with a female cousin after several years of estrangement following a family dispute:

And so we started communicating that way, without falling all over each other, you know, and so the email was a great icebreaker, to be able to write back. So it was a great way to heal a wound, and now they just flow through quite easily....you know how it's very easy to put this voice on. "Oh, I'm really happy to hear from you." There wasn't any of that. You could actually tell by the way she kept sending an email back, she really did want to communicate. You know, how often have you rung someone, and you can sort of tell they don't really want to talk. But the email was... she didn't have to email back. But she did. And she keeps emailing back, and she keeps emailing back....She wants to. It was like extending an olive branch. It was a way to communicate without....yeah, without putting your head in the lion's den....But I think with the email it was a way to... gently send something off, and then just see where the warmth went between the two. And that's where I felt that [email] was great. (Robyn)

Implicit in Robyn's comments is the contrast between the 'push' nature of telephone calls and the non-intrusive 'pull' qualities of email. Whereas a ringing telephone demands to be answered (Plant, 2001, p. 30), an email metaphorically tips the balance of power in favour of the respondent. In Robyn's situation, email offered a vehicle through which tentative advances could be made, while simultaneously allowing both parties to 'save face' should the offer be rebuffed. As such, the relatively low social presence of email encourages a more open form of communication.

However, while email appears to be useful in managing difficult or awkward situations, the degree to which email is valued as a channel for exchanging emotional or sensitive information is less clear. A study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project suggests 'appropriate' uses for email are still being negotiated by many Internet users, with as many as 19% of regular "family emailers" indicating that email is "too impersonal" a communication channel for exchanging information with family members (2000, p. 23).

> In contrast to the more than 80% of family emailers who send informational notes to relatives, only 48% say they have sought advice from family members with online communications and just 42% say they have written email about something that upsets or worries them. (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 23)

Nevertheless, as the study points out, there is still a significant proportion of 'family emailers' who are prepared to use email to manage "sensitive matters", and who find the medium facilitates a more open and honest style of expression. Similarly, Boneva, Kraut and Frohlich's study reveals contradictory perceptions on the appropriate usage of email. While there is some evidence that "women may not consider e-mail very suitable for sharing of emotions and personal thoughts", the study also suggests that in some situations email may actually be "more appropriate than the phone for deep, emotionally laden topics with someone far away" (2001, p. 544). Likewise, Matzko's research suggests there are occasions when email can facilitate the sharing of innermost thoughts and feelings that an individual may have been unable to express through any other communications medium. In reflecting on one participant's use of email, Matzko notes "e-mail allowed her to give voice to 'the words that don't come out of my mouth. They're in my head, but I just can't speak them'" (2002, p. 52). Matzko's research also found that the paucity of cues embedded in emails may in some circumstances be an advantage. As one participant explained, email communication provides a "non-threatening" space to work through a potentially emotive family conflict (p. 52).

Research also suggests that in situations where the timeliness of a response is not important, computer-mediated communication may be as successful in facilitating effective interpersonal communication as 'richer' media such as the telephone (Walther, cited in Westmeyer et al., 1998, p. 32). Research by Holloway and Green (2004) indicated that email can successfully foster a sense of emotional connectedness, and a more recent study of young adult college students has found no significant differences in relational quality, regardless of whether the relationship is maintained primarily through face-to-face, telephone or online communication channels (Baym et al., 2007, p. 747).

Moreover, email communication permits users to control when and how much time they spend communicating; as such it's an ideal tool to manage busy lifestyles and coordinate schedules. The asynchronous nature of email facilitates the management of relationships, both locally, and those that span different time zones. It seems users are prepared to forgo the emotive gratification of a

telephone conversation for the convenience of email messages (Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 241; Westmeyer et al., 1998, p. 31). As noted in Chapter Four, women in particular appear to value the convenience of email (Boneva et al., 2001, p. 541; Holloway & Green, 2004; Matzko, 2002, p. 50; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 18). This attitude also came through strongly in this research project. As Lyn, a mother of two young adult children explains, "the thing I like about it is that you can just write a quick email. You know, I'm just thinking of you, this type of thing. You don't have to write a long one." Similarly, Ellie appreciates the succinctness of text-based modes such as email, text messages or instant messaging (IM):

> That's the other thing about communicating via phone, when you phone up a friend, you've got to go through all the niceties, and all the "How're you going?", and you can't make it too quick often, whereas email, or ... MSN [Messenger], you're just straight to the point, no fluffy bits. And that's really a time-waster ... and it goes on forever [saying hello/goodbye] and you haven't got time for that. And often, that's the key thing really. Often when I'm thinking about ringing a friend up that I haven't seen for some time, I would prefer ... you know, to make an arrangement to see somewhere, I'd rather just email or text, "How about today?" Even somebody that I only see once a year, I've just been thinking lately, I'll just give her a text saying "I'm available, how about we get together?", rather than ring her up. 'Cause when I ring her up I'll be on the phone to her for an hour...so that's a really good thing. It's the succinct message that you can get across that I really like. (Ellie)

Also reflected in Ellie's comment is her preference for spending time with someone face-to-face, as opposed to having long in-depth telephone or email exchanges. Thus, Ellie actively manages the limited time she has for social interaction, so that more gratifying exchanges can take place in person, rather than through mediated communication channels. Ellie is not alone in this; the perception that face-to-face communication is the 'gold-standard' of communication channels was a sentiment expressed by many other participants, and is summed up by the following comment by Dana: "a phone call is a far more personal communication [than emailing]. You can actually hear the other person, but it's a long shot away from face to face communication where you're reading someone's body language." Moreover, at least one of the women lamented the fact that some degree of personal contact is making way for mediated communication:

> I find with, I've got a couple of really close friends, and one of them tends to, we used to meet quite a bit for coffee, but now she's relying more on email, and I miss the close connection we used to have over the cup of coffee, so I'm, yeah, I think sometimes people get too busy and think that email is an ok substitute, and it's not. (Beth)

As with Ellie's use of text messaging, many of the participants use mediated communication tools such as the telephone, email and text messaging more for instrumental purposes (Noble, 1987), such as organising activities and arranging to meet in person, while in-depth exchanges are reserved for meeting in person. This dynamic is expressed in the following comments by Katrina:

> *Do you receive emails from friends at home?* [as opposed to receiving emails while at work]

Yes, yes I do. We probably communicate more by phone, than by email. I mean we certainly do communicate by email as well, yeah, sort of bit of 50/50 as well, I guess. If we're communicating by email, it's more arranging to meet somewhere type of communication. So it's pretty short and sweet.

If you had something that you really wanted to talk to them about?

Oh, I'd phone, and arrange to meet. Have a coffee. (Katrina)

However, where face-to-face communication is not possible, there may be occasions where email has advantages over telephone conversations in terms of expressing feelings more accurately or authentically. As Matzko notes in her research, email enables users to shape their writing so it more accurately reflects their intentions, in contrast to face-to-face or telephone communication, where individuals may speak before really thinking (2002, p. 74). "E-mail empowers users with the opportunity to plan, contemplate and edit their comments more mindfully and deliberatively than they could in more spontaneous conversation in person or on the telephone" (Matzko, p. 73). This quality is appreciated by several of the women in this current research project, as indicated by Fran's perspective on the comparative merits of email and telephone calls through the Internet:

I find emails better than VOIP because I can plan what I'm saying. I can make sure it's succinct. I can make sure that I've covered everything. That I said it the best way possible. That I've made it... you know, not just impulsively blurted out something, and then well I really didn't mean it that way. (Fran)

For Zoe, email has provided a reflective environment in which to come to terms with some difficulties she's faced over the last few years. Looking back over emails she's sent to family and friends, Zoe has come to realise how much this writing has contributed to her emotional recovery:

I've looked at the writing, and it brings a different perspective to it. Whereas talking to somebody on the phone, the words are out there but you don't actually see them and reflect on them. You're sort of making it up as you go along and responding as you go along, whereas when something's written down, I always go through it and edit it and add things, and play around with it all. It's just a different perspective on your life. (Zoe)

Simply putting her feelings into email messages has allowed Rita to vent some of the pent-up resentment that comes from almost single-handedly bearing the brunt of caring for a mother suffering with dementia:

And sometimes I'll type up this spiel and not send it and then yeah, he [adult son] doesn't know how lucky he was [that] he didn't get that one.

Does it help to write it down?

Apparently it does, yeah … I've heard that, yeah I mean we've all heard that and letter writing, you know, actually physically writing it I've never done, but I've certainly typed it down [on email]. Yeah, without necessarily realising at the time I'm not going to send it, and sort of you know maybe put it into draft until a later time, and then not finished it and thought, no. (Rita)

For at least one woman, the asynchronous environment of email provides an opportunity to share her thoughts without being interrupted or having the conversation sidetracked by another party, as often happens when the communication is synchronous. While Ellie prefers where possible to meet face-to-face for in-depth conversations, there are times when email facilitates a more liberated and honest form of expression. Indeed, one of the key themes emerging from Conforti's research on women's self-development through CMC is the degree to which online communication enables women to step outside culturally constructed definitions of appropriate female behaviour. As Conforti notes,

> keeping themselves and their true and honest voices out of relationships is a way of being "nice," and not appearing selfish by bringing too much of themselves and their emotions and thoughts into any relationship. My findings suggest that CMRs [computer-mediated relationships] are a place where my participants do not feel the enormous pressure to accept cultural definitions of femininity and conform to the pressures to present a false self, a self that is less than who they really are, by not intruding on others by talking about themselves and their experiences in dialogue. (Conforti, 2001, p. 196)

As Conforti found in her research, CMC allows women to "speak in voices that are self-focused and self-oriented" (2001, p. 194), in contrast to cultural expectations which "hold that women should be listeners, subordinate, and unassertive" (Belenky, cited in Shelesky, 2003, p. 193). Such a dynamic is evident in Ellie's discussion on how the nature of her communication with her cousin in the United States subtly changes depending on the medium:

> Actually with my cousin ... I can actually write a lot more. Yeah, because when I'm with her, and perhaps over the phone, she tends to be a little bit more domineering....She's a few months older than me, and I think she would tend to think that... she mothers me, actually. That's what I've found. So, our relationship... yeah, that's the difference actually. That's the key. Sometimes I prefer to email her and I get more out, because I can express myself more, I can express myself more to her, whereas when we're communicating either on the phone [... or face-to-face], she may not let me finish my sentence or something, and she will be more dictatorial to me. She'll say, "No, this is how you should feel", or "this is how this or that" ... there's an ease there with email....But that's the key, *that's the difference* ... I don't get that in emails. I don't feel that authority.

> *In emails you're more peers?*

> Yeah, definitely, definitely. And she will express more about herself, whereas when we are together, or over the phone, she's telling me how to do it and how to deal with it, she's becoming more the mother figure, the healer. (Ellie)

Echoing Sless's assertion that communication ecologies are influenced by a range of factors, including the capacity individuals have to effectively use available communication options (1995, p. 7), this research also demonstrates that communication choices are determined by the availability of technological assistance if needed. For example, despite having two very technologically literate teenage daughters, Hilary struggles to perform even basic tasks such as printing emails:

Are the girls fairly technically literate?

Yeah, because they've been learning Word and Windows since Year Two, and because [school] has a full laptop program by Year Seven. So they train them, so that by Year Seven they can work their tools. But neither are having the interest or the time to tell me how to do something.

The kids have no inclination to teach mum?

No, even things like... I wanted to print off... like, I received an email and I wanted to print it off so I could have a hard copy of this letter, you know? And I asked them to do it, and nothing happened, and I asked again and nothing happened, and eventually three months later I just deleted it, and I never ended up with a copy, because I didn't know how to... But then you can see that yes, you probably would want to keep certain communications, you know? Like something that's meaningful, you're going to want to keep a hard copy, not just keep it on file. I wouldn't know how to put it on a file anyway, so that's not an option either. (Hilary)

As these excerpts from interviews conducted with women as part of this research project demonstrate, women either consciously or intuitively make negotiations and compromises in their choice of communication tools that reflect not only the range of communications media available to them and their own technological competencies and preferences, but the context and circumstances in which social relationships are embedded. As Boase notes, "the variety of communication media currently available ... means that individuals can combine different media differently, to suit their needs and personal preferences" (2008, p. 492). Echoing Fischer's 'hermeneutic approach (C. S. Fischer, 1992, p. 6), Boase emphasises "the purposeful user as being the main force that accounts for the use of communication technology" (p. 492). This theme will be explored in more detail in the following sections, which consider how women draw on a diverse range of ICTs to manage family and social relationships.

6.4   Women, Families and ICTs

6.4.1   *Mothers and children: Continuous connections*

As with previous research exploring women's use of ICTs such as the telephone and Internet, this current research project confirms the importance women attach to maintaining strong and ongoing connections with their children, particularly where their children have grown and moved out of the family home. Interviews reveal the women draw on a complex mix of communication options to sustain meaningful relationships with their children and extend care and support, helping to bridge the physical and emotional distance that may separate the generations. All but 4 of the 40 participants are mothers, albeit at varying stages of parenting. While almost a quarter are still engaged in caring for school age children, 17 of the mothers no longer have any children living in the family home. As noted in Chapter Three, although the 'empty nest' has stereotypically been constructed as a time of despair and loss in midlife women's lives (Viney, 1980, p. 134), research suggests that most women

welcome their children's departure, and the opportunities this new-found freedom offers (Daly, 1997, p. 168; Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 382; R. Leonard & Burns, 2006, p. 31; Neugarten, 1979, p. 889). These findings are supported by this current research project; in general, the women view their children leaving home as a natural part of life; an important step in their children's development into independent adults, and the next stage in their own life. They also recognise it as a period during which the relationship they share with their children must be redefined.

For at least one woman this transitional process was made easier by her ability to maintain a 'continuous connected' presence in her daughter's life through the exchange of frequent mobile telephone calls and text messages. After Gillian's youngest daughter moved interstate for study, the mobile phone offered a channel through which she could extend care and support remotely, and gain reassurance her daughter was safe. In this context the mobile phone serves to maintain, albeit temporarily, the status quo between maternal authority and a young adult's desire for independence and freedom:

> I used to make her [daughter] text me. 'Cause I kept in phone contact with her - thank God for the mobile phone. You know, because I just made a plan with her. Cause I said, "If you're going out I just like to know when you're back in. Not that I'm, I don't want to keep tabs on you", but I was really [laughs]. And she was very good. So if she was going out at night she used to text me, and of course with the two hour time difference I'd be woken up. So he [husband] was a bit intolerant of that, but that was the way it was, you know? And I was terrible, you know? I wouldn't sleep, wondering if she'd come in. I'd ring her up or text her, and say "Where are you?" And she'd say, "Oh, I'm out." (Gillian)

Gillian's use of the mobile phone represents what Ling describes as "a greatly extended umbilical cord" (2007, p. 62), enabling her to continue to exert some measure of control over her daughter despite living on the other side of the country. Thus, whereas mobile phones *can* be positioned as tools through which intergenerational "power-geometries" are subverted by children (Donald & Spry, 2007, p. 114), Gillian's use of the mobile phone represents a strategy through which gradual ceding of autonomy from parent to newly independent child is at least temporarily disrupted. In this context, Gillian's use of text messaging can also be read as a "transitional object", borrowing from both Ling (p. 62) and Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley (1991, p. 217), in that it enabled Gillian and her daughter to move through a transitional period in which both must adjust to changes in their lives. Licoppe refers to this notion of "constant accessibility" as pivotal in the construction of "'connected' relationships", wherein "strong bonds are reaffirmed and experienced through a series of interactions constituting a 'continuous conversation'" (2004, p. 145). While this connection was a useful security strategy for Gillian in the short term, it was not a dynamic that could be sustained indefinitely. From Gillian's daughter's point of view, the need to 'check in' with her mother at the end of a night out may have eventually caused her to resent or resist this form of quasi-surveillance. Closer to home, Gillian's husband eventually tired of the night-time wake-up calls:

It came to the point where [husband] said to me, "You've got to let this go." The fact that I was concerned about her, wondering whether she was... he said, "She's fine." And that's when I thought, right, ok....I felt that, you know, I just had to let her go. (Gillian)

Nevertheless, during the transitional period when Gillian was adjusting to her daughter's move, the mobile phone afforded a critical continuous connection between mother and daughter. Indeed, having only recently relocated to a new city, Gillian's daughter did not have access to a landline telephone[51] or a home Internet connection, so the mobile phone offered a relatively inexpensive, convenient and immediate link between mother and daughter where other options were not so readily available.

Indeed, many of the women interviewed highlighted the role that the mobile telephone and text messages play in helping them keep in touch with their children. As Gillian's experiences suggest, rather than a conscious decision by the women themselves, this mobile connection is more a reflection of both the communication options available to their children, and their children's familiarity and preference for using this form of communication. When asked how she keeps in touch with her young adult children now they've moved out of home, Lyn's response highlights how her communication needs adjust to meet her children's limited communication options at this particular stage in their life: "Text message. They don't... neither of them have email, and neither of them have telephones [landline], they just have mobiles, so it's mainly text" (Lyn). Even where a woman's preference is for face-to-face or the telephone, as is the case with Robyn, they inevitably fit in with their children's preferences. However, as Robyn's comments suggest, whenever possible she tries to use the convenience of text messaging to coordinate more emotionally gratifying telephone calls:

How do you keep in touch with your children?

Mobiles [laughs]. Mobiles, mobile phone. [My son] SMS's all the time. I feel like saying, "could you just phone me?" But then as they say, you can SMS. You SMS when you don't have time to talk.

It's a lot easier just to ring someone?

Well that's what we say to them. We say, well you know, "When things start going backwards and forwards, wouldn't it have been cheaper to phone?" And then what usually happens, with [daughter] in Melbourne, what I'll do is I'll SMS her and say "When you're free, SMS me and I'll call you." And that's usually what happens with her. With [son], sometimes I phone and leave a message on his message bank, but 9 times out of 10 I just phone them.

Do you ever email (daughter living in Queensland]?

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[51] Australian research suggests many young adults rely heavily upon mobile telephone services, limiting their use of a landline connection to connect to the Internet (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2007, p. 25). Likewise, research in the USA also indicates that some people are relying on mobile phones, and no longer maintaining landline connections (Boase et al., 2006, p. 10).

She changes her email address like she changes her underwear, so I haven't been able to keep up with her. So I usually phone her. (Robyn)

While Gillian, Lyn and Robyn's communication options for connecting with their children are largely limited to the mobile phone, other women in the study draw on multiple communication technologies to maintain contact with children who have moved out of home. The option to draw on multiple channels might be particularly important in situations where both parties may be travelling at the same time, and don't necessarily have access to conventional communication channels. For Dana, who travels frequently on business, access to a range of new media channels ensures she has multiple ways to reach a daughter who is currently travelling overseas:

My daughter set her blog up as a communication device, when she was going overseas. She said to me I'll have to set up an ISP and a website, so I can write things once and everyone can be appraised of what we're doing and where we're at. I said rather than do that, set up a blog. It's free, it's web-based, very easy to use, and you can insert stuff, so that's what she's done, so we continually post to that. It was great when the bombings were on in London because [friend] and I were in Hong Kong, and she [daughter] sent an email that said "We're ok", and I said "What?" We hadn't been watching TV, and we were in the second day of a full-on conference and hadn't heard about it, and of course the first thing that I did was go to the blog, where she had posted immediately she was ok. (Dana)

Likewise, Janette employs a range of communication tools and strategies to sustain a close relationship with a daughter living overseas. Having moved to Australia from the United Kingdom (UK) as a young woman in the early 1970s, she vividly remembers the isolation she experienced at that time. Janette often had to wait weeks for packages and other communication from her mother in the UK, which only exacerbated the sense of emotional and physical isolation she experienced:

I know exactly how I used to feel when I moved here and I didn't used to get letters from my Mum for ages, and I used to think, oh... You know, back in the days when you didn't phone, you had to book a call, and you used to think, oh, it'd be nice to get a little bit more. (Janette)

Remarkably, the tables have now turned, with Janette's daughter embarking on an extended working holiday in the UK. However, in the 35 years since Janette immigrated to Australia, the communication options have expanded dramatically; the potential immediacy of online communication channels such as email, instant messaging services and webcam now foster a connected, continuous, and emotionally responsive link between Janette and her daughter, as the following comment indicates:

How often would you email her [daughter]?

Oh, virtually every day. She doesn't always email me back every day, because we can just get on the computer....I could just sit down in the evening when I go home and one sentence, that's all it has to be, dreadful day, guess what happened today? I might not get anything back for 2 days, I might get something back in 30 seconds, you know?

What's going on there, what's the weather like? That's what's wonderful about it, it's an immediate communication. (Janette)

In this context email provides a quick and convenient link, one which is particularly appealing to women like Janette, whose time is already stretched thinly between work and other family and social commitments. Indeed, as mentioned previously, one of the key reasons women value email is the convenience of being able to control when, for how long, and to whom they communicate (Boneva et al., 2001, p. 541; Holloway & Green, 2004; Matzko, 2002, p. 63; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 18). It is through quick messages sent at the end of a busy day that Janette shares her life most intimately with her daughter. The exchange of the mundane and routine minutiae of everyday life underpins the construction of a shared experience and a "common world" (Licoppe, 2004, p. 138). In a similar vein, Duck contends that "everyday talk continues relationships because it continues to embody partners' understanding or shared meaning, and it continues to represent their relationship to one another in ways that each accepts and is comfortable with, or which 'ratify' the relationship" (cited in Canary & Dainton, 2006, p. 733). Indeed, it is often the exchange of the everyday, seemingly unimportant things which have the most potential to draw us closer together, but which are most likely overlooked in irregular telephone calls or even more infrequent letters (Conforti, 2001, p. 151; Matzko, 2002, p. 54; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 23). As Wilding's research revealed, even banal comments on the weather can serve to enhance perceptions of social presence and emotional connection: "more significant than what is said in these exchanges is the moment of exchange itself, which reinforces a sense of the relationship between sender and receiver" (2006, p. 132). Coming from a more abstract level, Abrahams' account of the construction of Creole culture found that

> Rather than looking on communication as calling for the passing on of a message within a clearly defined presentational unit, the Vincentian seeks to emphasize interpersonal relationships established through talk, and information-passing is subordinated to a sense of celebration in coming together for the purposes of simply pursuing friendships. (cited in Horst & Miller, 2006, p. 89)

For Janette and her daughter, being able to share the ups and downs of everyday life through a "continuous conversation" (Licoppe, 2004, p. 138) reinforces a mutual level of familiarity and sense of connection. The significance of this type of connection is underlined by research which indicates that frequent communication between mothers and adult children leads to enhanced emotional connections, which in turn encourages greater levels of interaction (Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994, p.65; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, p.366). A similar dynamic is reflected in Matzko's research on women's relational use of email. As one of Matzko's participants noted, her frequent emails to her sisters, sharing "'tidbits of information', - things that they would have been unlikely to share prior to

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the advent of e-mail [strengthened] the connection between her and her sisters" (2002, p. 54).[52] While research has consistently highlighted an association between "increased interaction and increased liking" (Adams & Stevenson, 2004, p. 368), the causal link between more frequent multimodal communication and an increase in the overall level and quality of communication is not entirely clear. Nevertheless, as Adams and Stevenson argue, it is highly likely that the introduction of new communication channels will bring positive benefits to personal relationships (2004, p. 368). Quantitative research notes a relationship between the strength of the relationship and the number of media used (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, cited in Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2002, p. 8), as well as a link between the amount of face-to-face and telephone contact on the one hand, and email communication on the other (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 22; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2002, p. 8), but does not extend these findings to consider whether increased communication in one mode might directly lead to an overall increase in communication and enhanced relationships. However, findings from two Australian studies provide evidence that the use of email can lead to other opportunities for communication, which in turn have the potential to foster closer connections (Singh & Ryan, 1999, p. 29; Wilding, 2006, p. 138). As Singh and Ryan noted, "email makes a different kind of incidental communication possible", whether the conversation is continued through email or other communication channels such as the telephone (p. 29). Likewise, Wilding's qualitative study of transnational care-giving found that once families began using email to keep in touch with family members living overseas, both the quantity and the quality of interaction increased (p. 138). Notably, the introduction of email "into the communication pattern ... would often stimulate even more telephone conversations" (p. 131). Wilding found that even very short email messages could encourage quality interaction through other modes:

> Whereas in the past a telephone call had to be prearranged by letter to ensure that everyone was at the phone at the appropriate moment, email allowed people to respond instantaneously to a question such as "are you free for a chat?" (Wilding, 2006, p.131)

A similar dynamic is evident in this current research project. For Finola, who prefers voice communication over text-based media, combining quick text messages with Internet enabled telephone calls provides an ideal opportunity to indulge in leisurely synchronous conversations with a daughter studying overseas:

> You know, [daughter] will text me quickly, "Are you near [the computer] ... can you talk now?" And I just whiz over to the computer and click in Skype, and we talk then, you know?....Yeah, we talked for almost two hours last week. (Finola)

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[52] Conforti notes that the trivialisation of "women's concerns and interests" reflects a patriarchal construction of women's talk as "trivial or irrelevant". For Conforti's participants, online environments provided a "place to talk about what they know is important [given] … the lack of that place elsewhere in society" (2001, p. 160).

Echoing Wilding's thoughts, Finola's use of text messaging and Skype provides an example wherein "each new layer of technology [is] … arguably being used to communicate more efficiently with existing modes, even as it offer[s] … an alternative" (Wilding, 2006, p. 131).

It may also be that infrequent conversations require more stylised 'chit chat' at the beginning of conversations, potentially minimising the time available for more meaningful conversation, while frequent communication "means you can almost dispose of this chit chat and actually *communicate* [italics added]" (J. Pachniuk, personal communication, July 15, 2008), which can potentially lead to deeper levels of connection being developed. Lawton, Silverstein and Bengtson draw on George Homans' (1950) model of Social Exchange to contextualise the dynamics within intergenerational relationships fostered by frequent communication:

> Positive sentiment increases the propensity of people to interact, and ... the familiarity gained through interaction increases positive sentiment among them. Those who share common experiences are likely to develop a collective identity and a sense of shared meanings and purposes that build empathy in the relationship; simultaneously, positive sentiments gained from such an association serve as symbolic rewards for maintaining or increasing the ongoing interactions. (Lawton et al., 1994, p. 58)[53]

For Janette, an ongoing conversation with her daughter in the UK is also sustained through her use of MSN Messenger, an instant messaging service that facilitates a synchronous chat environment:

> She's [daughter] on MSN quite often with other friends, so when my computer boots up... my husband's on a different computer, we've got two set up in the house... and we hear the "beep beep", and [daughter] has logged in to MSN... not necessarily to talk to us, but as soon as she does we'll sit down and say "Hi, how are you going?" (Janette)

These everyday conversations are supplemented by regular fortnightly telephone calls using an Internet enabled telephone service (Skype), and occasional packages containing gifts, newspaper clippings and "extra bits and pieces" sent through conventional mail. In addition, on special occasions such as Christmas and birthdays, Skype is combined with webcams to allow family members to also share the experience visually, and enhance the feeling of emotional connection:

> For example, Christmas Day 2006 she [daughter] was at home in London and one of her flat mates was cooking Christmas dinner. We set up Skye to Skype, on her laptop computer in their kitchen and on our desktop in the family room and we could see and talk to them all as they arrived downstairs, came through the kitchen, and all called Happy Christmas. It was almost like having her at home. (Janette)

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[53] This section has been drawn from a refereed conference paper presented at the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) Conference 2008, Power and Place (Dare, 2008). Available from http://anzca08.massey.ac.nz/massey/fms//Colleges/College%20of%20Business/Communication%20and%20Journalism/ANZCA%202008/Refereed%20Papers/Dare_ANZCA08.pdf

Thus, while Janette's main channel of communication with her daughter remains email, she also employs a number of other communication options to maintain a presence in her daughter's life, and sustain a close and continuously connected relationship. As Licoppe suggests, their "relationship is played out across the entire technological landscape in which it is set" (2004, p. 139). Significantly, Janette's communication choices are to a large extent shaped by her daughter's preferences and circumstances, as well as her own level of satisfaction with the sense of emotional connection fostered through their daily email and MSN 'conversations':

And how often would you call?

Once a fortnight maybe, mainly because she's busy, and I can only call her at home....but, you know, you don't need to call them that often, just... if you're emailing regularly. It's only if I think of something that I wanted to ask her, then I'll give her a call. But mainly communication is by email. (Janette)

In a follow-up interview with Janette some 19 months after the initial interview, she reflected on the comparative value of the different modes of communication she uses to connect with her daughter. While noting that they 'talked' on MSN Messenger "quite a lot", this wasn't a wholly satisfying means of communication for Janette: "when she [daughter] was 'online' on MSN (typing) she was also usually talking to her friends and I got the impression that I never had her 'full' attention" (Janette). In contrast, the 'person-to-person' nature of email offered Janette a more direct (and private) communication link with her daughter. Moreover, the asynchronous aspect of email allows Janette to carefully compose messages to her daughter. In this context, email can offer particular advantages over synchronous forms of communication such as the telephone and MSN messages: "Email was the best for receiving and imparting information because I ... [was] able to think about what I ... wanted to say beforehand" (Janette).

However, while Janette values the controlled nature of email communication over the more spontaneous instant communication of MSN Messenger, another of the women interviewed, 55 year old Ingrid, found the very spontaneity and immediacy of instant messaging 'conversations' with her son and his partner to be the most appealing aspect. Moreover, by combining her use of MSN Messenger with a webcam, and taking advantage of the option to communicate via voice or text, Ingrid is able to enjoy a richer and more gratifying connection with her son and his partner:

But the bonus, the biggest boon for me now, is that the kids in the UK, we've got webcam. We've had a webcam since they left, actually. I got it about six months after they left, and we just use MSN Messenger, and we sit and talk to each other endlessly. If I go online and they're online, we have a chat. If I've got something else I need to be doing, or I'm busy, we still talk and I'm still doing that, so it's like they're there, as much as they would be there if they were living here....And sometimes I'll come on and they'll be already talking to someone, and I'll just say, "Keep going, I'll just leave the machine on, and nudge me when you're ready." And I'll get this ding a ling, and I'll hear it and come in from the kitchen or the garden, or wherever I am. Because I want to

talk to them. And it's absolutely delightful. The only thing you can't do is hug them! (Ingrid)

As Ingrid's comments indicate, rather than chatting to her son and his partner in one chat 'room' while they simultaneously chat with other people in other 'rooms', Ingrid prefers to wait until they are free to chat directly with her. In doing this, she is able to avoid the need to compete with her son and daughter-in-law's friends for their attention while communicating online. This is something which Janette, who also occasionally used MSN Messenger to communicate with her daughter, found detracted from the quality of this particular communication channel.

What is also evident from Ingrid's comments is the degree of enjoyment she derives from these very natural and relaxed 'face-to-face' conversations. As the following comment indicates, while Ingrid feels that email is a useful tool to send information such as itineraries, photographs and other digitally-based material, or to send messages when her son and his partner are not immediately available, she feels it is a poor substitute for the very real sense of connection fostered through MSN Messenger and webcam: "I mean, if I wanted to type all day I would send then an email....There's no reason to [email] when I can actually see them [using MSN Messenger]" (Ingrid). Thus for Ingrid, the ability to verbally and visually communicate fosters a very real sense of connection that can't be replicated using either text-based email channels, or through conventional telephone calls.

While Janette and her daughter appear satisfied with the level of emotional connection derived through their daily email and MSN conversations, such that their telephone conversations are viewed as a secondary and supplementary means of communication, this is not a commonly held view among many of the other women interviewed in this study. As mentioned previously, the women's comments consistently reveal a strong hierarchical attitude towards communication channels. Perhaps not surprisingly, face-to-face communication is overwhelmingly considered the ideal form for communicating and emotionally connecting with others. Where this option was not possible, the telephone was generally considered the 'next best thing'. For women such as Finola, a 52 year old mother of five, the telephone conveys a sense of closeness and reassurance that can't be replicated through text-based communication. When asked why she might choose to telephone a daughter who is currently studying overseas in preference to emailing her, Finola explained: "generally I just want to hear her voice [laughs]. So... I miss her terribly." Finola's comment echoes previous research (Moyal, 1992, p. 58) which suggests women value the "transparency of the phone, the way it [feels] ... 'natural'" (Mercier, cited in Haddon, 2004, p. 62). For women such as Finola, a "powerful association [exists] between voice and [emotional] connection" (Matzko, 2002, p. 64). Indeed, when her daughter went on exchange as a high school student some years previously, the telephone provided a critical link for both Finola and her daughter:

I mean she was [away] ... for six weeks and I think the first three weeks cost us more in phone calls every single night than the whole cost of the [trip]....So each night she was

ringing me saying "I don't think I can do this ... Can I talk a bit longer?" "Yes darling, it's fine." Thinking tick, tick, tick. Forty five minutes every night for the first three weeks. (Finola)

The degree to which mothers may be prepared to shape their communication patterns and needs to fit in with their children's circumstances and wishes is evident in Finola's ongoing communication patterns with her daughter. When her daughter began her postgraduate studies at an overseas university she suffered acute homesickness. During this 'settling in' period, the family communicated almost entirely through weekly letters written by Finola:

> You know, that first ... for the first month I wrote every week and she'd get the letter I'd post at the end of the week. And I'd write... literally each night I'd write the date happening, because she [daughter] wanted to settle first without having the contact on emails and Skype, which I understood. So for the first actually two months we didn't email, we wrote....she felt if she spoke on email or talked to me on the phone she'd get too upset. (Finola)

Once her daughter overcame her homesickness, communication with her family settled into a 'continuous conversation' fostered through multiple media. At the time of the first interview with Finola in mid 2007, she was relying upon frequent emails and weekly telephone calls using Skype to maintain contact with her daughter: "I email them [daughter and son-in-law] every second day and we try and speak once a week" (Finola).

In the nine months between a first and second interview, Finola's communication options with her daughter narrowed once again, this time in response to her daughter's increasingly stressful study commitments. Aware of how tempting it is for telephone conversations with her family to last an hour or more, Finola's daughter consciously decided to avoid using the telephone. In addition to restricting telephone calls, her daughter has placed a limit on how much time she will spend emailing her family in Western Australia. While she has requested that her family continue to 'keep her in the loop' of family activities by sending regular emails, Finola's daughter proactively manages her time by only sending one group email a week. In this context, the medium of email has given Finola's daughter control over when and how much time she spends communicating, in contrast to telephone conversations which are often difficult to cut short without appearing impolite (Matzko, 2002, p. 63).

Fortunately Finola understands the stresses her daughter is under. In these circumstances her desire to support her daughter manifests through alternative means; as well as regular emails, once a month Finola sends letters and other material such as photographs and newspaper clippings from home. Such 'newsy' letters and packages sustain the close relationship Finola enjoys with her daughter, particularly during times when other communication might be limited, and also reinforce the links her daughter has with her family and community back home in Australia.

For both Janette and Finola, their appropriation of multiple communication technologies, combined with reflexive communicative behaviours that 'fit' the changing needs and circumstances of

their adult daughters, represent their desire to maintain a close and loving presence within their daughters' lives, whilst at the same time acknowledging and respecting their daughters' independence and autonomy (Haddon, 2004, p. 63). The quality of this ongoing relationship reflects, to a large degree, the intimate bond that has developed between mother and daughter over a long period of time.

6.4.2 Remote Mothering: The role of ICTs in supporting active Mothering 'in absentia'

The bonds that have developed between these two women and their daughters have been built upon shared understandings and experiences over many years, and for the most part fostered through face-to-face communication. More recently, as the girls grew towards maturity and independence, their interactions have been supplemented through mediated communication technologies. The situation is quite different for another of the women interviewed, 52 year old Pippa. Since she was involved in a serious car accident seven years ago, which left Pippa with permanent disabilities, her three school-aged children have lived with her ex-husband. Three years ago her ex-husband and children moved to a coastal town almost six hours drive away. Since then Pippa has had to rely almost completely upon mediated communication to maintain contact with her children. As the following comment indicates, access to email has been critical in enabling Pippa to maintain an ongoing relationship with her children:

Can you tell me a little about the role the Internet played during your rehabilitation?

The best thing was, when I was in rehabilitation and they provided a computer, and I went to TAFE so I could practice on a computer ... I went to TAFE and got my email address, and sent them [children] an email for the first time. You know, "This is mum." Then I got to sending cards and all sorts, and it was such joy, but if that computer hadn't been accessible, firstly at rehab ... I might have been down the track before I started. (Pippa)

Access to the Internet has also enabled Pippa to actively mother her children, albeit remotely, by sending them school-related material, as well as other information that mothers and adolescent daughters are normally likely to share on an everyday basis:

So how often would you have kept in contact with the girls by email?

Well, at least now about twice a week, and the rest are phone calls of course, but having said that, that's just email. But I forward them, downloads and information that's sent to me that might help them at school. And I also forward them attachments, say, about fashion and shoes and health.

So that's in addition to the two emails you send?

Oh yes, yeah. Because I often say to them, "Did you receive my emails?", and they'll say "Oh no, I haven't read them yet", and then they'll read them later. (Pippa)

In addition to emailing and pointing out websites of interest, Pippa also talks to her children through MSN Messenger:

I like the chat line too, with my children. I know when they're online, I have that little pop-up.

Oh, what is that, MSN?

Yeah. I love that.

Would you tend to use that more with your children than email?

Um, no, probably more email. On MSN they like to be in touch with their friends as well, so their mum's mostly in another chat room, and they're going backward and forwards, but I do like it. (Pippa)

As with Janette and Finola, Pippa also uses the telephone, both landline and mobile, and texting to maintain a continuous conversation with her children:

And how often would you telephone them?

Um, I had a long conversation last night ... but I telephone at least once a week, or they phone me, and we SMS a lot, so we are still in contact. But they always know what I'm doing. Even when I'm in the bus in the morning, I'll SMS them and say, "Hi", and when I get home I'll send an email.[54] (Pippa)

In this respect Pippa's communication to some extent resembles Rakow and Navarro's concept of "remote mothering" (1993, p. 144), a dynamic in which, through the mobile telephone, women can continue to perform their mothering role even when they are physically remote from their children. As applied by Rakow and Navarro, 'remote mothering' most often refers to women managing care-giving responsibilities when they are not able to be co-present with their dependent children, such as during work hours, or when they are otherwise engaged in activities that take them out of the home and away from their children temporarily. Thus for the women in Rakow and Navarro's study, the mediated connection fostered through the mobile phone supports a relationship largely manifested through face-to-face communication. In contrast, Pippa's use of mediated communication to connect with her children represents the *primary* means through which she sustains their relationship. As such, her appropriation of mediated communication channels such as the Internet, the telephone and text messaging resembles more closely the behaviours described by Cecilia Uy-Tioco's (2007). Uy-Tioco's research documents how Filipina mothers working overseas rely upon the mobile phone to maintain an active presence in their children's lives, despite being

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[54] Since this research project only involved interviews with women, it is not possible to know for certain how the women's children viewed the communication strategies their mothers employed to maintain contact. In Pippa's case, it is evident she is very keen to maintain an open line of communication with her children, and has appropriated a range of technologies to accomplish this. How her children feel in response to this is difficult to tell from the information available. Certainly, previous research indicates some children view their parents' use of mobile phones as a strategy to monitor and, at least in part, control their activities (Ling, 2007, p. 39). However, Pippa also explained that her children told her about MSN Messenger, which may be viewed as evidence that they welcome the multiple points of communication they have with their mother.

separated by many thousands of kilometres. For these women, the mobile phone represents a channel through which "real-time and constant communication" can bridge the distance "between mothers and children separated by time and space" (p. 256).

While the women interviewed by Uy-Tioco may be limited in their communication options, Pippa is fortunate in that she is able to connect with her children through multiple ICTs, which include not only the mobile phone, but also text messaging, email, instant messaging and the landline telephone. For Pippa, mothering is enacted, albeit remotely, through multiple and often continuous conversations carried on throughout the day. It is through these conversations, conveying not only the important or noteworthy events, but also the mundane, trivial and inconsequential matters that make up everyday life, that Pippa sustains an intimate and constant presence in her daughters' lives.

As Janette, Finola and Pippa's stories demonstrate, maintaining a close relationship with children who no longer live in the same city, state or even country can necessitate a proactive and strategic appropriation of multiple ICTs. But even where parents and children cohabit, there may be occasions where household members' schedules permit few regular face-to-face conversations. Work, study, sporting and recreational commitments often mean that mothers and their young adult children pass like 'ships in the night', even where they still share the family home. This is an oft-repeated theme in interviews conducted with such mothers. For Stella, email has proven to be the most convenient and reliable method of communicating with her son:

> *Who do you email the most?*
>
> Mmm, good question. Probably my son, actually, we email quite a lot during the day. Yeah, probably my son.
>
> *So he's obviously in a situation where he has easy access to a computer?*
>
> Yeah, yeah, he's ... at a computer quite a bit. Yeah, he'll email me and if I haven't caught up with him 'cause he's out with his girlfriend we'll sort of email during the day.
>
> *He lives at home still?*
>
> Yeah, but I don't see him. That's probably why we get on [laughs] (Stella).

In this situation email provides an appropriate level of connection for both mother and son. While Stella alludes jokingly to 'getting on' with her son better when she doesn't see him, their relationship in the past has in fact been rocky. Although their relationship has improved in more recent times, email nevertheless facilitates an open line of communication that permits both parties the necessary level of freedom and separation needed to maintain their relationship at a comfortable level. Email is also a good fit for Stella and her son during the working day, as both have ready access to a computer, and the use of email facilitates the exchange of quick 'to the point' messages throughout the day.

However, the degree to which email is perceived as being a useful tool to communicate with young adult children is dependent upon a number of factors, including the purpose of the communication and whether children have the time to read and respond to their mother's messages. For Ellie, while the opportunity to email her son is appealing, she is cautious about impinging on him during work time: "I'm a bit reluctant, I'd like to be able to email him more, but I know he's busy at the other end." Moreover, as the following comments suggest, when the purpose of communication is to check on their children's wellbeing, email may not be considered the most appropriate medium:

> Because he's [young adult son] not such a communicator, everything's just "Everything's alright"....I often think, if I could just email him, "How's it going?" Just give him a little bit of motherly wisdom, if you like, just short and sweet, but I can't really 'cause he's busy at work and I know my answer, usually when I do communicate about anything, is "Yep, sure, be there", you know, the very monosyllabic. So that's not really very satisfying, so that doesn't really work. (Ellie)

In addition to the communication channels already discussed, a small minority of women interviewed are also beginning to use social networking sites (SNS) as additional channels to sustain a 'continuous connection' with their young adult children.[55] As with women's adoption of communication practices such as text messaging, the interviewees' participation in sites such as Facebook appears to be engineered more by the communication practices of younger members of their family networks, than by any conscious decision by the women themselves to manage their own social networks through social networking channels. As this research indicates, midlife women are often drawn into these environments at the invitation of daughters and/or other young relatives. For example, Sherrie was encouraged to join Bebo by a niece, while Janette has also been 'friended' by young family members: "I do actually use Facebook - not avidly, mainly because my daughters and nieces etc. invite me on and that is the one they (26 year olds) mostly seem to use" (Janette).

Likewise, some of Janette's female friends have also been encouraged to join SNS by younger members of their families: "Quite a few of my friends/contemporaries are now getting on Facebook because their daughters/nephews/nieces are signing them up" (Janette). As Janette's comments imply, the choice of social networking site isn't necessarily driven by a consideration of which social network is most likely to offer the women the best chance of connecting with their *own* network of friends, but rather defaults to that most used by their children and other young family members. This is not to suggest that older women aren't actively using sites such as Facebook to connect with family members, as well as their own social networks. Just as younger users keep track of changes affecting members of their social networks, so too do SNS provide useful opportunities for midlife women to stay abreast of the latest news affecting family and

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[55] Over the period in which this research has taken place (between 2006 to 2009), it appears that the number of women using social networking sites has increased (Lenhart, 2009). It is therefore quite possible that more of the women interviewed in this research will have set up a profile on a SNS since the interviews took place.

friends. As Janette observes: "I am linked to my daughters, some family members and friends. I keep up to date with recent photos, [and] new babies."

However, the tendency appears to be for these women's social networking practices to be largely determined by and, to an extent, limited to the social network structure of their children and/or other young family members. As such, it could be argued that whereas young people's social networking practices result in the development of "egocentric networks" (d. boyd, 2006, para. Egocentric networks replace groups), the situation may be subtly different for their mothers. Women's use of social networking sites to connect with friends is considered in more detail in Section 6.5 of this chapter.

It is apparent, therefore, that midlife women are using a range of communication technologies to sustain meaningful connections with their children, regardless of whether they see their children on a regular basis or are separated by thousands of kilometres. Examining women's appropriation of ICTs in the context of the relationship between mother and child highlights the degree to which women's use of communication technologies such as the telephone, email, instant messaging and text messaging can be seen to be instrumental in the construction and maintenance of "connected relationships" (Licoppe, 2004, p. 145). The following section continues an analysis of midlife women's communication practices by considering how they use ICTs to manage relationships with, and extend care and support to, their ageing parents.

6.4.3 *Midlife women and their ageing parents: Intergenerational communication and care*

The ageing and death of parents is something that many men and women confront during their midlife years. As noted in Chapter Four, while the parent-child bond is a significant element in both men's and women's lives, analysis of research over the last 50 years has consistently demonstrated that across the life cycle, the mother-daughter relationship is experienced by both parties as stronger than other comparable family relationships, such as the mother-son dyad (C. J. Boyd, 1989, p. 299; L. R. Fischer, 1991, p. 240; Frank et al., 1988, p. 736; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998, p. 927; Lye, 1996, p. 88; Moyal, 1992, p. 57; Proulx & Helms, 2008, p. 238; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, p. 277; Young & Willmott, 1962, p. 45). Moreover, as Lye's meta-analysis of research into adult-child relationships confirms, the strength of the relationship between adult children and their parents is largely dependent "upon the kinkeeping activities of women and especially on the mother-daughter bond" (1996, para. Discussion). Given this, it's perhaps not surprising that research consistently indicates women maintain more frequent contact with their parents than do men (Lye, 1996, p. 88), and are key sources of support for ageing parents (D'Abbs, 1991, p. 38; Millward, 1998, p. 21; Shearer, 2006, para. Findings).

For an overwhelming majority of the women interviewed in this research project, the most common channel of communication through which they maintain their relationship with their parents is the landline telephone. As discussed in Section 6.3, women's communication choices are determined by a range of factors which reflect not only their own technological literacy, but more importantly, the social context within which the exchange occurs. This is particularly evident in relation to my interviewees' communication with parents, which to a large extent is defined by the limited communication options used by the women's elderly parents. Only a few parents have Internet access, and many depend upon public transport, which limits their mobility; they therefore rely heavily on telephone communication to keep in touch with their middle-aged daughters. The preference for telephone communication might also be an indication of familiarity and understanding between women and their parents (Boase, 2008, p. 495). While many women were hesitant to call certain people for fear of interrupting them, this is unlikely to be an issue with elderly parents. As European research on telephone use reveals, older people generally have more leisure time, are more flexible with how they spend their time, and are more predisposed to chatting on the telephone (Claisse, cited in Haddon, 2004, p. 125). In common with Moyal's Australian research findings (1992), Claisse found that widows in particular enjoy long telephone calls (cited in Haddon, 2004, p. 125). Therefore telephone calls are unlikely to be viewed as an intrusion on parents' time; it's more likely that they will be perceived as a welcome opportunity to chat and catch up with their family's lives. In describing the nature of telephone calls with her parents, 48 year old Alex contrasts them with short telephone calls from friends that she'd received during our interview:

> But see those phone calls that I've had, they're the sorts of calls that I have with people. But if that was Mum or Dad it'd be a big, long talk.

> *What sort of things do they talk about?*

> Oh it's about the weather and the veggies, and with Dad it's two sided and with Mum it's more one sided. It's what she needs, what she hasn't got, you know that sort of thing? (Alex)

While parents may have the time to indulge in long conversations, this might not be the case for their middle-aged daughters. For Katrina, the demands of three teenagers and a full-time job are juggled with 'keeping an eye' on her widowed mother. No longer able to drive, and living in an area not well serviced by public transport, Katrina's mother relies upon her adult children visiting and telephoning. Katrina's description of how she keeps in contact with her elderly mother in many ways captures the tensions, obligations and love that embody many midlife women's experiences:

> *How do you keep in touch with your mum?*

> Ah, phone, and I also see her as well.

> *How often would you give her a call, or she'd call you?*

Oh, I'd call her every second night, probably, yeah. And my brother calls her every night, I know.

Do your conversations with her tend to be long, or it's more just "How're you going?"

Um, not too long. Well it could go on and on, so I usually tend to try to cut it off. I suppose I'm usually on the phone about 15 minutes to my mother. (Katrina)

Katrina's strategic 'management' of telephone calls with her mother reflects the ongoing challenge for women in balancing their own desires, needs and responsibilities with an underlying sense of obligation towards their parents.[56] This is not to say that the women interviewed expressed resentment or unwillingness to 'be there' for their parents; rather that for some midlife women, meeting everyone's needs, including their own, can be a challenge. As Raelene's comments imply, the sense of guilt most often associated with working mothers who are accused of abrogating their parenting responsibilities might also extend to older women and the care of their parents:

I thought when I had three days work, I'd see Mum once a week, but it's horrible. I feel guilty, 'cause I can't fit everything in. And I thought this week, I'm just going to use two days to do what I want to myself. 'Cause I just felt like, everyone's volunteered me for everything else. With the babysitting, with work, and things we've had on, I just needed two days just to do what I wanted. 'Cause I feel heaps better, now, just because I've done that. Just walking around the shops, having time out. Today's been lovely [laughs]. So I feel a bit guilty not seeing my Mum more. (Raelene)

The need to manage their time means that some women find ways to 'multitask'. For Robyn, strategic use of her mobile phone enables her to enjoy long conversations with her mother who lives in the Eastern States. Although aware of legal prohibitions on using mobile telephones while driving, the opportunity for Robyn to utilise driving time in a more productive way is appealing:

But it's like, I use my mobile phone when I'm in the car. Like I'll phone Mum, if I'm going up north on the freeway, I'll phone her then, because I know I am sitting still. I've got the time to sit still and talk to her, which I know you shouldn't do. I mean, I've got hands free, but it's just a great way... but that's when I like to ring Mum as well, because I'm driving there, and I know I'm having to sit for half an hour, and I usually ring her then. (Robyn)

For the participants who have parents living locally, the telephone is more commonly used as a supplement to regular face-to-face visits. Telephone calls to parents living locally vary from almost daily, to the weekly 'catch up'. The ability to telephone does not seem to obviate the desire, nor as

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[56] While research consistently finds women are more often called upon to care for their ageing parents, whether as primary care-givers or involved in arranging for their parents to be in a formal care environment, than are men, there are some notable exceptions. Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding note that in some non-western cultures, men are obligated to provide care for their parents, in a representation of "'filial piety' from [for example] the Singaporean and Afghan sons" (2007, p. 2). It's also apparent from Katrina's reference to her brother telephoning her mother every night, that while perhaps not the norm, there nevertheless *are* men who initiate frequent communication with their ageing parents, and who enjoy close connections with their parents. As noted in Section 4.2.1, such frequent calls have the potential to enhance the relationship between Katrina's brother and his mother, and provide increased opportunities for the exchange of care and support.

Raelene's comments suggest, the sense of obligation that many women have to visit their parents. As Finola's comments indicate, the telephone is often used to check on parents' well-being in between visits:

> I speak to my mother at least five times a week.
>
> *How do you speak to her?*
>
> Oh, she calls, I call. Just make sure they're ok. I see them at least once a week. (Finola)

As well as providing a reassuring link for both parents and daughters, the telephone is also used instrumentally to arrange face-to-face meetings. As such, rather than a platform for conversation, the telephone is used as a device through which more satisfying meetings can take place. In this respect the use of the landline telephone as an organising device has parallels with the common practice with younger family members of sending text messages on mobile telephones to arrange face-to-face meetings. This dynamic is evident in Pat's explanation that her once or twice weekly visits to her widowed mother are generally preceded by a quick telephone call:

> *How do you keep in touch with your Mum?*
>
> I usually go round there, to her house. I ring her, and say, you know, "You want to go and have a coffee somewhere, or come round for tea?", but they're not long conversations. I generally go round, and sit round there with her for a few hours, or get her to come over. (Pat)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the telephone assumes a more critical role when parents don't live within easy visiting distance. When frequent face-to-face visits are not possible, the ability to hear each others' voices is highly valued. As highlighted in Chapter Four and Section 6.3 in this Chapter, the telephone is generally considered a superior medium for conveying emotion and facilitating a sense of social presence. As Nicholas Negroponte suggests, "embedded in sound is information about feelings" (cited in Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 240). However, there are situations where telephone communication becomes difficult and/or unsatisfactory. For Joy, the ability to access cheap international telephone calls to connect with her mother in the UK means little when faced with her mother's debilitating forgetfulness as a result of dementia. Even where parents may enjoy reasonable mental and physical health, certain disabilities may make telephone conversations challenging. Lorraine's mother's hearing impairment means telephone conversations are no longer a satisfactory way to bridge the distance between Lorraine in Perth, Western Australia, and her mother in the UK. In these circumstances, telephone calls are reserved for special occasions:

> Well mum's 93. She's very difficult to talk to on the phone, but I make a point on her birthday, Mother's Day and Christmas [to call her]. And then, besides those it would be very rare, because it's not... she can't understand... I mean, she's fine, but she can't hear. It's very difficult to talk to her [by phone]. (Lorraine)

Reflecting differences in life expectancy between men and women, at the time of the interviews almost half (19) of the women's mothers were widowed. Another 14 women had both parents still alive, while six women had lost both parents. Only one of the women had just their father left alive. In general, the women's comments concerning communication with their fathers echoes previous research which indicates mothers and daughters are generally more communicative than fathers and daughters. An advertisement for Telstra currently being run on Australian television exploits this notion of men as reluctant telephone users and poor family communicators to promote the message to young adults to 'call their Mum'. The advertisement begins with a middle-aged man working in his garage on his car. The telephone rings, and the ensuing conversation goes like this:

Dad:	Hello
Young adult daughter:	Hi Dad, it's me. How are you?
Dad:	Oh, I'm good. How are you?
Daughter:	I'm good.
Dad:	Oh, well I'll just get your Mum.
Daughter:	No wait, I called to talk to you.
Dad:	Oh really?
Daughter:	So how are you?
Dad:	Oh I'm good. How are you?
Daughter:	I'm good.
Dad	[Long pause] Well I'll just get your mother. [Puts the phone down and goes to get wife]
Daughter:	[Smiles]
Text on screen:	*Time to call your Mum?*

Similar gendered communication patterns were also referred to by women I interviewed in this research project. The following comments by Hilary exemplify such a dynamic:

So how do you communicate with your parents?

Telephone.

How often would you telephone them?

I speak to my mother every second day. Yes, and it used to be longer when I first moved to Perth. I used to ring her all the time, everyday, and talk to her.

So, are you very close to your Mum?

Mmm, obviously, in a very bizarre way, you know? When I first moved over and I was quite young ... but still we would even fight on the phone [laughs] but we would still ring each other, and [ex-husband] used to say, "Oh, you're just ringing to have a fight are you?" [laughs]

Do you talk to your Dad when you ring up?

No.

Do you ever talk to him on the phone?

Yeah, but like only once a month or so.

Ok. And do they tend to be long conversations?

No, he's not a phone person, he just says a few things and then he's ready to go. (Hilary)

Although face-to-face and the landline telephone continue to be the mainstays of communication between the women and their parents, a number of the women are also supplementing their voice communication with the newer technologies of email and text messaging. Of the 40 women interviewed, 10 have parents who use email. Of these parents who have 'gone online', eight are mothers and three are fathers. In terms of how representative these parents are, a recent report based on United States' statistics indicates that 11% of adult Internet users are over the age of 64. More significantly, the report claims that "the biggest increase in internet use since 2005 can be seen in the 70-75 year-old age group. While just over one-fourth (26%) of 70-75 year olds were online in 2005, 45% of that age group is currently online" (Jones & Fox, 2009, p. 2). The growing popularity of email among Internet users over 64 is confirmed by the finding that "fully 74% ... send and receive email, making email the most popular online activity for this age group" (Jones & Fox, 2009, p. 3). The greater range of ages of the women's parents in this current study – the youngest parent was 70 and the oldest 93 at the time of the interview – may help to explain the discrepancy between the 25% of parents in this current study who are online, and the 45% of 70-75 year olds in the United States. Regardless, it is evident that older generations are increasingly moving online (Jones & Fox, 2009, p. 1). Not only is this likely to impact on the information resources they are able to access, but, given their propensity for emailing, it will also influence their communication patterns.

For those women who do communicate with their parents using email, use is restricted in the main to an instrumental capacity; that is, emails are used to exchange information about particular things or to make arrangements. The following comments by Vicki are representative of the way most of the women use email with their parents:

Yeah, so I have a chat to her now and again, but I don't do a lot of emailing to Mum. She might email me, and just remind me she's going to Esperance for two weeks, or, you know, that sort of thing.

You wouldn't email her for a chat?

No, no. (Vicki)

For 48 year old Debbie, emails with her 80 year old mother represent a pared-down version of a telephone call: "I find emails are more facts, you know, stating events that are happening or what I've done in the day, factual things rather than like a story, like you tell over the phone. But the emails are just facts" (Debbie). In other situations, email and text messaging are used as an adjunct to telephoning and in-person contact. Such is the case with Beth, whose widowed mother lives in the Eastern States; the occasional email provides a convenient and quick way to exchange information, in between regular telephone calls:

> It's not very often I do [email]; she might ask me for some information, when we're talking on the phone, she might ask me, oh, let me think of the latest thing. Oh, for example, a friend of hers has got macular degeneration, and my husband's brother has too, and I said, "Oh, there's a health food shop product that the eye specialist recommended [husband's] brother get on to but I'll find out and then I'll email you the title." So that sort of thing, rather than her get a pen and write things down, or if she wants a phone number, I'll say to her, "Are you in a hurry, or can I look it up when I hang up and send you an email straight away with it?" I might forward on some emails that I know she'd be interested in, maybe friends of mine that Mum knew too. (Beth)

In other situations, particularly where cost is a factor, email is used as a fall-back communication channel. For 46 year old Toni, email is viewed not so much as a supplement to telephone calls, but more as a means to avoid the expense of overseas telephone calls. In this context, budgetary constraints make email a more appealing prospect: "Occasionally I email Mum and Dad ... if the telephone bill looks a bit big, I'll email Dad. 'Cause I tend to just pick up the phone, more than I do [email]" (Toni).

Even where the women have encouraged their parents to get Internet access and helped them to use email, most elderly parents nevertheless continue to rely upon the landline telephone for their everyday communication needs. Such is the case with Katherine, who managed to convince her 81 year old mother to use email on the eve of a recent trip overseas: "we were going to [Europe] for six months, and I just said "I don't do snail mail anymore, I don't write letters" and she went "Argh!", and got herself a computer and managed to do email while we were away." Nevertheless, as the following comments suggest, Katherine's mother reverts to the telephone whenever possible:

> Well she doesn't like the computer and she doesn't like email. It's really strange, because she's taken, she's a smart woman and she's made moves forward with a lot of things and a lot of people her age have taken to the Internet and email ... but she's very gregarious, it's got to be human beings, so she likes to talk on the phone, or, and she wrote letters, too, and she's happier with letters than email. But she isn't really comfortable with the computer. I think she doesn't feel like she's in command of it, she doesn't know what she's doing, that really bothers her, and she, she would rather speak to you on the phone, so she would ring us [in Europe]. (Katherine)

Of course, it should be noted that just as parents expressed a common preference for voice communication, so too did some of the women. While both Debbie and Robyn exchange occasional emails with their mothers, the emails do not replace the need felt by both parents and daughters for

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regular telephone calls. In explaining how emails 'fit' with telephone calls to her mother, it's evident that for Robyn, the voice is integral to developing a sense of social presence:

Does your mum use email?

Yes, she does. But I'm very much a voice person. I very much like to hear people's voices.

However, while email is most often used as a secondary, supplementary means of communication between elderly parents and midlife women, there are situations where this form of mediated exchange has the potential to become a much more important part of inter-generational communication. As Boneva, Kraut and Frohlich's research indicated, the lower social presence afforded by email may be conducive to the emergence of a more honest and open style of communication; one that can "redefin[e] ... a traditional communication pattern between parent and adult child" (2001, p. 540). While 'Barbara' rarely shared "personal thoughts and emotions" with her father through face-to-face or telephone calls, email communication had enabled father and daughter to establish a much more intimate and emotional connection (Boneva et al., 2001, p. 540).

In other situations, email presents an opportunity for a more emotionally gratifying connection between parents and children to emerge. In this current research project, one participant, Janette, reflected on how emails with her widowed mother in the UK enabled them both to bridge the geographical distance between them. Although her mother has now passed away, the recollection of their email conversations evokes fond memories for Janette. When asked how she communicated with her mother before she died, Janette replied:

Lot of communication with my mother, I mean, she was 82, we badgered her into getting a computer, and badgered her into learning how to use [it] so that we could actually [communicate] by email, and she did really well right up until she died. Lots of elderly people do, and they really find it quite nice.

So your mum really took to it?

She did, yeah. She kept saying "I'm no good at this, I'm too old for this", but she kept persevering, right up to the end when she went into hospital, she was good. And it was good because she could sit up at 8 o'clock at night, 9, 10, 11 o'clock at night, email me about things, and she didn't have to go to the post office. She knew that as soon as she sent [it] that it was gone, or I'd get a panicky one saying "I've lost it, I've lost it, I pressed the button and it disappeared", and I'd say "Don't worry Mum, it came [laughs], I got it."

Would you also call her?

Yes, but not as often as I emailed....Oh, it was great, because she always used to say, "Oh, I'm no good at this, excuse the mistakes and things." We always used to laugh about it, but in actual fact, she was brilliant. My mother was a real stickler for writing things correctly, but of course once she got into the email, and she was never a typist, there were barely any commas, no paragraphs or anything like that. She didn't like it.

We said, "Don't worry, lovely to hear from you", you know, always they need a lot of encouragement [laughs]. (Janette)

For Janette then, and perhaps her mother, email was able to provide the necessary level of intimacy and connection, such that occasional telephone calls became a supplement to frequent emails. While it's important to note that Janette's experiences are not representative of the majority of the other women interviewed, they do illustrate that text-based channels such as email can, for some women with ageing parents, offer a valuable additional means of connecting. As well as providing Janette's mother with the flexibility to communicate when it suited her, the email exchange also enabled Janette to develop a deeper understanding of her mother's life:

Did she tend to talk about the same sort of things as she would have written about [in letters]?

Yes, she did, but I think email is so much more of an instant form of communication that they tend to write about things they've done recently. But when they're writing, I don't think I got as much information, because writing might have only happened... my Mother never used to write fairly regularly. She was the only one that did. She used to say "It's about time your Dad wrote you a letter", but that only happened in a blue moon [Dad's letters] and because she didn't write that often, there would be a lot missing out in between. Whereas once we got the email communication it was on a daily basis, or a weekly basis. Of course you hear a lot more about the incidental things that happen at home, and Mrs So and So down the road. It was the sort of thing you would never get in a letter because it would be out of their mind by the time they got to write a letter, so it does really make things a lot more personal in that way I think. (Janette)

Through sharing the fine-grained minutiae of each other's lives, Janette became aware of her mother's trips to the doctor, of invitations to birthday parties, and intended overnight stays with elderly sisters living in the next village – in short, the 'incidentals' which make up everyday life. Such frequent, 'phatic' communication provided an opportunity for Janette to express care and concern, by following up with her mother on issues raised in previous emails, such as when the results from her mother's medical tests would be available, how she had got on with the eye specialist, or how 'Aunty Betty' was getting on.

Another way in which email is being used to support strong connections between women and their ageing parent is illuminated through Ellie's reflections. As the following passage reveals, Ellie is using email almost as a surreptitious additional communication channel to maintain an ongoing, 'under the radar' connection with her father, while at the same time avoiding potential confrontations with her mother:

The other thing I wanted to briefly tell you too, with that relationship with my Mother and Father, it's very difficult in that, you know they'll play [off each other], Dad won't play me off with Mum, because he's a lot more secure in his own person, whereas Mum is very manipulative, and often I'll ring her up but I want to speak to Dad as well, and she gets a bit shitty when I talk to Dad ... she can't handle that, that him and I have a great relationship. And so I will email him ... very often I'll send him a little joke, he

loves jokes, and I'll say "How you going, we'll catch up soon" or something like that. (Ellie)

While only 10 of the women interviewed have used new media channels such as email and text messaging to connect with their parents, it is likely that in the future this practice will develop into a much more integral part of the communication nexus between midlife children and their ageing parents. As Jones and Fox's (2009) report indicates, the proportion of older people now moving online is going up at a faster rate than any other sector in the population. As they 'catch up' with their technologically experienced children and grandchildren who are already online, it is likely that the way older people communicate, and who they communicate with, will also change. Such changes may have significant consequences for intra-family relationships, as alternative pathways and connections are forged. The following section considers this in the context of sibling and extended family relationships.

6.4.4 Women, siblings and the extended family: Maintaining relationships across time and space

While the parent-child relationship represents an enduring element in many people's lives, sibling relationships can also play a unique and important role (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 121). The singularity of sibling relationships is highlighted by Dunn, who suggests "the relationship that has the longest duration of any in a woman's life is her relationship with her sibling; it is lengthier than her relationship with parent, husband, or child (cited in Mercer et al., 1989, p. 121). There is also evidence that sibling bonds increase in importance during midlife when young adult children move out of home, and women's time is no longer so circumscribed by their children's activities (Waite & Harrison, 1992, p. 641). In common with other intimate relationships in women's lives, communication technologies perform an important role in maintaining sibling connections, as well as extended family networks, particularly where families are dispersed across the globe. As cross-cultural research has indicated, international migration has fundamentally reconstituted family networks to transnational contexts (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Wilding, 2006). This is particularly significant from an Australian perspective, where two-fifths of the population are first or second generation immigrants (Julian, 2005, p. 150). Historically, Western Australia has had an even higher proportion of immigrants than the Australian average. The most recent census data indicates Western Australia continues to attract a higher proportion of migrants than other states and territories, as the strong resources industry and booming economy has drawn people from both interstate and overseas.[57] The 2006 Census reveals that 27.1% of Western Australians were born overseas, compared to the national average of 22% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007b). These statistics are

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[57] Despite the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), Western Australia continues to have the highest increase in population of all Australian States and Territories, with a 3% increase in the year ending June 30, 2009. This compares to the Australian average of 2.1% for the same period (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009b).

reflected in the sample of women participating in this current research project. Of the 40 women interviewed, 7 migrated to Australia as children with their parents, 12 had migrated to Australia as young adults, and another 6 women have moved to Western Australia from interstate.

As a country of migrants, Australia has historically been represented as isolated and remote (Blainey, 1968). Within this context, Perth – the most isolated city in the most isolated of continents - symbolises an even more extreme form of separation. For previous generations, the 'tyranny of distance' (Blainey, 1968) symbolised not only a physical isolation, but perhaps more significantly an intellectual and emotional separation as well. Even just a quarter of a century ago new migrants to Perth faced a number of hurdles in maintaining close bonds with those they'd left behind. Long delays in exchanging letters, combined with the expense of long-distance telephone calls, assuming both parties had access to a telephone, and the difficulties of managing time differences, meant that for many 'transnational families', communication was infrequent (Wilding, 2006, p. 130).

However, the intervening years have seen a number of changes to the communications landscape which have significantly 'changed the game'. Not only have international calls become considerably cheaper (Vertovec, 2004, p. 220), and home telephone connections more common (Wilding, 2006, p. 130), but a number of new communication technologies have emerged to supplement existing communication channels. Within this social context of 'transnational families', communication technologies such as the telephone (Vertovec, 2004, p. 220) and emails have become critical facilitators of "lives lived across borders" (Mahler, 2001, p. 585). The impact of low cost international telephone calls on migrants' sense of connection is alluded to by Anna, a 49 year old participant in this current research project:

> As phone calls were $1.00 per minute when I first moved to Australia, the present charge of 18 cents per minute is very cheap, plus my phone carrier caps the US calls. If I want to hear any of my sisters, mum or my friend, I just pick up the phone. (Anna)

While low cost international calls have, according to Vertovec, enabled transnational families to "retain [their] ... sense of collectivity" (2004, p. 222), emails appear to have been most instrumental in providing a platform through which families separated by time and distance can reinforce, and in some cases enhance, a relationship that might in the past have suffered due to the obstacles of time and distance. As one of Wilding's research participants observed, when communication with his elderly mother through letters and telephone calls was no longer satisfactory due to his mother's dementia, he was able to check on her progress via emails exchanged with his sister, who was his mother's main care-giver (2006, p. 134). In this particular situation, the siblings' use of "email ... served to restore a relationship that had been temporarily interrupted" due to physical separation (p. 134). Similarly, Baldassar's research with Australian/Italian families documented the changing patterns of transnational family communication once email is adopted. As Baldassar's interview with an elderly Italian woman suggests, while 'Signora Carla' continues to value the telephone for its

ability to convey social presence and emotional connection with loved ones, she also appreciates the value of new communication channels in connecting her daughter, who has migrated to Australia, and her other children who continue to live close to her in Italy: "Signora Carla ... explained that before [the Internet] ... her son and daughter rarely communicated; 'now [her daughter] sends him these messages, which I don't understand how. So they're in touch now'" (Baldassar, 2008, p. 253).

Similar findings have emerged in this research project. Just as Janette's email exchanges with her elderly mother in the UK demonstrated the capacity for electronic channels to facilitate the establishment of a greater level of familiarity and intimacy with her mother, so too has email helped to foster her ongoing communication with her brothers, most of whom continue to live in the UK. The influence that email has had on family communication patterns is evident in Janette's observations:

> I have a lot of email contact [with family members] ... [more] than I ever did before ... far more close contact. Prior to [email], and certainly prior to, before my parents died, I would only speak to my brothers occasionally, over the many years that I lived here. Perhaps, when I went back there to visit, or would speak to them at Christmas time or ring up for their birthday. Now, I might speak to them 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 times a year, and I call email when I speak to them.

> *Pardon?*

> To me, email is almost like speaking to them, because it's almost direct communication. And of course, the phone. In between, the phone. Thanks to email and free phone calls [VOIP] we have regular contact and send photos ... and generally know a lot more about each other's daily lives than we ever would have done 30 years ago. (Janette)

This notion of email use promoting greater knowledge of and familiarity with family members was a key finding in an earlier study of women's use of the Internet (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, pp. 23-24). However, while the early quantitative study indicated that email was becoming a more common means of communication between many siblings than the telephone (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 23), it was unable to provide insights into whether these new communication patterns were making substantive improvements to sibling relationships, and to what degree gender might be implicated in these changes. In contrast, findings from my research suggest that in some situations, men are more likely to communicate with their sisters via email than they would be likely to pick up the telephone and call them. Not only does this lead to more frequent communication, as is implied in Janette's comments above, but it can also foster a heightened sense of familiarity and comfort, which in turn encourages a deeper level of connection between brothers and sisters, as Beth indicates:

> *Do you think since you've started using emails that you communicate more with your siblings?*

> Yes, brief notes, yes.

Does that give you a sense that you've become closer to them, or not? I don't want to lead you here.

No, no, closer to the male members, yes, because they're more likely to whack back a quick response than they would be, you would never get a letter from them, or a phone call, or rarely anyway. But it's also, I'm thinking of my youngest brother, because of the little, brief, to-ing and fro-ing on email, when we talk on the phone it's usually a good, decent sort of conversation. We're much more at ease with one another, so I think the email has helped build that comfort level so that you then feel closer on the phone. (Beth)

Thus both Janette's and Beth's use of multiple communication channels can be seen to enhance family relationships that have in the past been enacted infrequently. Such a dynamic was briefly discussed in Chapter Five.[58] Indeed, the use of email to re-establish or re-energise extended family and social connections that have faltered or lapsed due to distance or other circumstances has been well documented in academic research (Boneva et al., 2001; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 24). As with the social history of the telephone, there is some evidence that women are again the agents in this process of reconnection, with Boneva, Kraut and Frohlich observing that women, "being socialized in connectedness and seeking closeness in dialogue....seem to have embraced e-mail as a less costly way to connect with others far away" (2001, p. 546). Certainly a number of women in this research project use email extensively to communicate with extended family members, more often than not female cousins and aunts. For example, Zoe actively communicates with a number of family members:

I have my aunt in New York, and there's another aunt in Canada, and there's a couple of cousins in the UK, and an aunt and a cousin in Italy. And I have, oh, immediate family members, as in my siblings, I email them....The [aunt] in Canada, I [email] maybe once a week to her, and the ones in Italy would be once a week. Which we wouldn't have, I wouldn't [keep in touch] with writing [letters]. (Zoe)

Moreover, as Zoe's comments imply, a number of recent studies have indicated that the decentralised and distributed nature of electronic communications can challenge the communication 'status quo' by creating alternative and/or supplementary communication pathways (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 120; Wilding, 2006, p. 135). As noted previously, traditionally women, and in particular mothers or oldest sisters, have been the 'kin-keepers' (di Leonardo, 1987, p. 443; Rakow, 1992, p. 55) and primary 'hubs' through which family information is disseminated (Wilding, 2006, p. 135; Young & Willmott, 1962, p. 78). So central are women's activities to the notion of kin-keeping that di Leonardo went so far as to suggest that communication among kin members is actually dependent upon "the presence of an adult woman in the household" (p. 443). That is, communication within and between extended family networks appears to turn on women's kin-keeping activities. This pattern is

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[58] Parts of this discussion on the role of email in maintaining extended family connections first appeared as an article in the <u>Australian Journal of Communication</u> (Dare, 2007, p. 122).

certainly evident in the interviews conducted in this research project, with many women observing that prior to the introduction of email, most family news was disseminated through mothers, grandmothers or aunts. Such was the case with Zoe's family:

> *How did you maintain contact with family members [before email]?*

> Really just through reading my grandmother's letters. Occasionally, some years I'd get motivated and send Christmas cards, but I'm not very consistent with that. (Zoe)

However, once email is normalised within family networks, the situation becomes more complex. As Wilding's research has revealed, "rather than mothers and daughters forming the dominant nodes of communication, emails were sent between siblings and cousins and across other extended kin relationships, such as nephews and aunts" (2006, p. 135). Likewise, this research project provides evidence that women are using email communication to connect with a range of extended family members that they may not otherwise have done. As Alex's reflections suggest, it's unlikely that she would have ongoing personal communication with several nieces and nephews if she didn't have access to email:

> I use it [email] for ... well at the moment ... for keeping in touch with my nieces and nephews.... See when they were little ... they [cousins] all saw each other ... they all grew up together and ... so you know there was always that connection there but then [as they grew up] it would've been very easy for them to have gone off to their respective places, and I could've kept in touch with them through their parents you know and ... and sent messages through their parents and they would've been fine. But I think what I've been able to do is maintain the relationship ... I guess what's happened now is that I've been able to maintain that connection.

> *On a one-on-one rather than through a mediator?*

> Yeah and that's ... it's really nice because whenever they're in Perth now, like they'll always ring and they'll always try and have a drop in or have a coffee. Whereas I don't know if they would've done that so much you know if I'd just kept in touch through [sisters]. (Alex)

The notion that email can be a means through which to reinvigorate "previously dormant relationships" (Boneva et al., 2001, p. 541; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 25) is also a recurring theme in the interviews, with the following comments by Gillian representative of many interviewees' responses:

> *Do you think being able to use email to contact friends and family has helped [with family relationships]?*

> Oh it's been great. Love it. Very important, for me, anyway, yeah. Because if anything, email has facilitated me rekindling my relationships with my cousins. That's been good. And they've said the same thing. You know, we're not in and out of each other's pockets, but you know, they're on a different continent, but we know they are there. [Male cousin] apparently had a [health] scare, and I was able to email him and say "How are you?" And he was really appreciative that I'd taken the time to write him an email to say "How are you, what's happening, is your heart alright?" (Gillian)

Similarly, Janette has used email to reconnect with cousins living in the United Kingdom.

These rekindled connections have opened the door for the relationship to be manifested in other ways as well:

Would you say that you communicate now [using email] with people that you probably wouldn't [without email]?

Absolutely, lots of them. Cousins, particularly, who I grew up with in England, one or two of them who I've only really got into contact with [through email]. I knew them well when I was small, but [only] got into contact with them since I've been back a couple of times, since my Mother died, and prior to that since my Father died, and met them at the funeral, and yes, "I'm on email now." You know, [we] exchange email [addresses] and we've kept up a flying conversation, which is great, which is really good. And these people you visit now when you go back to England whereas otherwise [you wouldn't]. (Janette)

Moreover, it's not only the distributed nature of email communication that facilitates ease of communication with extended family members, but also the structural qualities of email messages as well. For Zoe, recipient lists attached to emails forwarded to her have been a useful source of potential contacts, and an opportunity for her to establish connections with extended family spread throughout the world. As such, she has actively 'mined' recipient lists embedded in emails forwarded to her: "You know how people send group things and they don't take off all the addresses? So I imagine I picked some up from there." Zoe's desire to reconnect with extended family, and the role this form of email message can play in fostering a developing relationship, is also indicated by the following passage:

Well actually I'm thinking of contacting ... my mother's youngest brother and his wife have split up, in their 60s, a year or so ago, and I got her [aunt's] email ... from one of the [forwarded emails]... my aunt never deletes [recipient lists]....and so she sometimes sends chain letter things, or I'll send her**.** So I'm thinking now of just putting at the top of the next one I send, "how are you? ... and it will be nice to keep in touch" and see if she responds to that. And also with my uncle ... he was 11 when I was 4, so there's [not much age difference]. So I remember him then, and I've met him twice as an adult, so I think, oh, well, I'll do the same with him. It's much more convenient to me, and much more do-able, whereas if I had to think about sitting down and writing a letter, and going out and posting it and so on, I probably wouldn't be bothered, but it's like, oh well, I'm on the net, I'll just put a few more words in this one and send it on. It's easy, isn't it? (Zoe)

As Zoe's comments indicate, even prefabricated 'chain' emails, containing jokes, stories and other generic material forwarded from one person to another, often without a personal message included, can nevertheless provide a channel through which more meaningful communication may be fostered at some point in the future. Given the extent to which Zoe relies upon email in general to manage family and social relationships, it could be argued that not only is her life now more pleasant as a result of the connections email facilitates, but that her future wellbeing is to some degree dependent upon the relationships that are fostered and maintained through her continuing use of this

technology; relationships that may, as a single person, be pivotal sources of social support in her later years. Certainly there is some evidence that the extended family relationships Zoe is fostering through her strategic use of prefabricated emails have already enabled her to expand her networks of social support during a recent difficult period in her life:

> I try to only check my emails every, sort of three days or so, I would say, especially with my aunt. She's always sending on those [prefabricated messages], that's her way of [keeping in touch]... and it's great, because we had no contact before that, and so now occasionally she'll put a little sentence at the beginning. Like, "How are you going?", and she asked me how I was, and I told her honestly how I was, and she wrote back and said, "I didn't realise, your Mother never said anything" ... and you know, my mother would have just said I was having a break from work I imagine. And so we had a nice little two way thing for a while, and then she asked my advice about one of her grandchildren. (Zoe)

Zoe is not the only participant in this current research project who values prefabricated emails beyond their transient and sometimes questionable entertainment value. Several of the women indicated prefabricated emails forwarded to them had given them new insights into family members. Diane has a rather difficult relationship with her older sister, eight years her senior. Perhaps partly as a result of the age difference, Diane feels that she's never really been close to her sister. However, through the kinds of prefabricated messages her sister forwards her, Diane has started to see her in a different light. As she describes it, these emails give Diane a clearer insight into her sister's personality, and serve to sustain a difficult, yet significant relationship for both Diane and her sister:

> There's been this real divide between myself and my older sister especially, and I guess I didn't really know her at all, but the sorts of things that she finds amusing, or finds meaningful, has really showed me another side of her. And that's been purely through 'forwards'. She's never sat and told me a joke or anything like that, and I don't know that she would....And because they're usually forwards of forwards of forwards, as a lot of them are, it's also given me a bit of an insight, 'cause you know you can look 'cause she leaves her recipient list, and I think, oh, well I know that was one of her old friends from her teaching days....so it's been quite interesting getting a bit of a glimpse inside her world, I suppose.

> *Which you probably wouldn't get in general conversation or over the phone?*

> Definitely not. Not at all. Not over the phone, not in conversation, 'cause even in face to face communication, our communication is still a bit stilted at times. (Diane)

The impersonal nature of prefabricated emails can also be a safe vehicle through which strained relationships can be sustained. Another way in which Zoe uses prefabricated email messages to strategically manage relationships relates to her communication with a younger sister. Zoe consciously uses the medium of email to maintain a safe and non-confrontational line of communication with her sister:

> [W]ith my sister in particular it's a very difficult relationship, and I think if we didn't have the emails we might lose all contact whatever. And I mean we had a huge fight ... a couple of months ago ... and after that I thought I'm just not going to go anywhere

with her anymore. But then down the track there was something that came through on the chain lettery things, and I thought, oh, I'll just send it to her, so that would have been a month after we had the fight, and I sent it to her, and um, I got something back from her, you know, one of those impersonal ones as well, and then the next time we were at a family thing, we didn't actually have much to do with each other, but I think it was a bit more comfortable than it would have been if emails hadn't gone backwards and forwards. So it's a non-confrontational way of still keeping in touch....We haven't actually exchanged any sort of messages, just been sending on... [prefabricated messages]. (Zoe)

In this situation, the detached nature of prefabricated emails, with minimal associated levels of social presence, supports a tenuous connection where all other forms of communication may be untenable for both parties, and at least leaves the door open to a potential future reconciliation. More significantly, without this non-confrontational mechanism there is every chance that the relationship between Zoe and her sister would break down completely.[59]

While this research offers support to Boneva, Kraut and Frohlich's assertion that email tends to reflect gender-specific patterns of communication, with women continuing to perform the bulk of communication with family and friends (2001, pp. 539-540), the interviews also provide evidence that in some situations the use of email appears to be changing family communications networks. Just as Beth's comments, noted earlier, suggest that email has facilitated more frequent communication with a brother, so too is Janette finding that email is more likely to be used by the male members of her family:

Men don't write, but it's amazing that they do email. I can barely remember when my husband last wrote [a letter] except to his Mum. In our case, because my husband is one of four boys, it's all the sisters-in-law that keep in contact all the time. All the wives. So there may not have been any communication there for seven or eight years except for the wives writing to each other.

But now you find that your husband and the other men...?

He communicates with his brothers a lot more now than he ever did.

Ok, 'cause one of the questions I had related to whether you believed your pattern of Internet use was different to your husband's?

Oh, it was up until, perhaps a year ago, 'till his Mother died, and since then he's persuaded his brother to get going with the Internet and get onto broadband rather than dial up, and he actually does communicate with him a lot more now than he did. So his brother is 67 tomorrow, and birthdays and all that sort of thing, men would never have bothered sending cards, it was always left to the wives, and now I notice that the communication is happening much more between the four of them [brothers], which is great. (Janette)

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[59] This discussion on the use of prefabricated email messages to sustain family relationships first appeared in an unpublished conference paper presented at the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (CSAA) Conference in Adelaide in December 2007.

Notwithstanding the positive ramifications of these additional family communication channels, the interviews also revealed that even where the potential exists for email communication to enhance family connections, not everyone takes up this opportunity. As Debbie explained, while email might offer a convenient channel to overcome time-zone differences with her New Zealand-based brother, its usefulness is limited by her brother's apparent reluctance:

Do you ever email your brothers?

No I don't really. I don't because... I'd like to speak to them, [but] I don't … because my younger brother's really busy anyway. He's got a business and I just don't think … I occasionally send jokes, but I just don't think he's got the time to look at jokes and things and I think he's just too busy. And he will say "Oh what did you send me that for?", or... you know, brothers do. (Debbie)

Similarly, while email can potentially help in managing the 14 hour time difference between Anna and her family in the American mid-west, the value of this communication technology for Anna tends to be limited by her siblings' lack of responsiveness to her emails:

Has being able to email your family made you feel closer to them?

Um... [long pause] it's the possibilities there, but when most of them don't respond... Initially I thought it would be great, because it cuts out that two week period of the mail, you know, letters, but...

If they're not responding... and they all have families?

Pretty much, apart from the two that try to keep in touch with me. So yes, I understand, they all have families, they're all quite busy. Certainly when I first had access to the Internet, I suppose 10 years ago, I emailed much more frequently, but I suppose the lack of response... I suppose that's the thing, isn't it? The people you're emailing have to reciprocate, otherwise it's [not going to work as well].

And yet you say when you talk to them [family] on the phone, they love a good chat?

Oh yeah, absolutely. It's kind of like, if you're talking and you're there on the phone, it doesn't involve extra effort....But to get access to the computer....You know, get the kids off, and sit down and write a letter instead of vegging out in front of the TV or doing the ironing or something, I don't know. (Anna)

These comments echo the discussion earlier in this chapter, which described how the non-intrusive 'pull' nature of email communication metaphorically places the 'ball' in the respondent's 'court'; where the respondent is slow to respond, or fails to respond to an email, any satisfaction the sender might achieve through the convenience of email is likely to be short-lived. Not surprisingly, so too is the potential that email use might enhance relationships conditional upon the recipient's responsiveness, particularly where communicants are separated by distance such that face-to-face communication is not possible. Such a scenario is also evident in Fran's comments about communicating with her extended family in the US:

Has Internet communication changed your relationship with your family?

[Long pause]. I don't think so. What makes the difference is, the people who work and the people who don't. Like the people who work don't have time for all this. So that's where the limiting aspect of it comes in. I mean, the potential is there, but they've already got too much on their plate. I don't know whether perhaps they'd prefer phone calls, and so they're communicating is mostly phone calls, and it's [Australia] is too far away, and they wouldn't have VOIP or anything. (Fran)

Thus, simply having access to the Internet and email doesn't necessarily result in people either having the time or the inclination to communicate more frequently with family members. As this research indicates, the degree to which new communication channels are perceived as beneficial in enhancing extended kin relationships is driven as much by each individual communicant's motivation and desire for communication to occur, and by their personal situation, as it is by any affordances offered by new media that may be considered superior to traditional communication tools.

Notwithstanding these limitations, it should be noted that in general the interviews support the premise that multiple communication channels, and in particular the online channels of email and Internet telephone services, are being used by many women as supplements to existing communication channels such as face-to-face and the telephone to enhance existing family relationships, as well as to rekindle lapsed or establish new family connections. Overwhelmingly, these new communication pathways are welcomed, and are viewed as strengthening family networks which may be dispersed across the globe. However, the introduction of new ICTs can also disrupt established family dynamics, and in the process challenge loci of power. This is particularly the case where family members have unequal access and/or knowledge of new communication technologies. Such a scenario may occur where younger family members have access to new communication platforms such as email, instant messaging and social networking sites, while older family members, because of limited access or technological know-how, continue to rely upon traditional communication channels such as the telephone and letters. This generational 'digital divide' results in new communication patterns or 'ecologies' emerging; ecologies that no longer rely upon information being disseminated through traditional communication channels. Such a situation is evident in Gillian's observations on the shifting nature of her extended family communications. When asked who she emailed regularly, Gillian replied

I have my cousin in [USA], who, through email [I have] reconnected [with]. She and I are very much on the same level.

How did you used to communicate with her before email?

Oh, I didn't. It was only through going back to the States and reconnecting with them, and now they're on email it's wonderful. Same with my brother [in the UK]. I get the occasional emails, you know, family emails off him as well.

If you didn't have email, would you still be talking to this cousin?

Not as often. It would probably be a birthday card and Christmas, and there'd be a little letter in it occasionally. That'd be it. Because I've got the email, I'm more in touch with what's going on in the family, yeah ... So I would say this last two years, I've had more contact with... this is my mother's side of the family, through email it's brought the cousins together, yeah....So I've reconnected with them....Well you see, that's why I see the relationship of my aunty and me [changing], because that position's shifting, you see, because she's got older, and she hates it. 'Cause I'm on email, and I get information.

So the role that was hers before...?

Of pulling the family together, and she'd be on the phone and talking to my Mum's brothers and sisters. But you see, because I'm in touch with cousins, it's like almost as though she doesn't like that....Because [previously] she would be the one in the family telling everybody who's doing what. I mean, that was her purpose, and as you see, because of information technology, it has changed. (Gillian)

As with Baldassar's research, Gillian's comments illustrate the ways in which the use of ICTs such as email can alter existing communication patterns, and facilitate wider and more distributed information pathways. More significantly, however, her story reveals the wider ramifications which differentiated access to communication technologies can have on family relationships. While Gillian welcomes new opportunities to communicate directly with extended family members, she is also sensitive to the need to assuage her aunt's pride by not overtly displacing her aunt as the appointed family 'kin-keeper':

I've taken my laptop down and shown her photographs and that that I've received. But it's almost like I'm giving her a bit of a kick in the face, 'cause I've got that knowledge and she hasn't. And that's why I'm respectful of her position, and that's why, if my cousin tells me something, I wait till I find out off her [aunty], and I don't let on. And I suppose I'm playing the game, do you know what I mean? And if I have information I share it with her, but I perhaps miss out bits that I know she's going to tell me [laughs]. (Gillian)

Thus as new communication technologies become normalised within family networks, they are not only leading to changes in family communication patterns, but are also, in some circumstances, challenging longstanding family power balances. Although not within the scope of this research, it is likely that this dynamic will continue, with anecdotal evidence indicating that young people's use of social networking sites is leading to increased communication between younger family members, potentially bypassing their older female relatives, who have been the traditional custodians of family knowledge. Further research in this area is therefore ongoing.

6.4.5 *Intimate connections: Women, partners and communication*

The nature of women's communication with their partners has so far received little attention in this research. To be fair, this may reflect in part the way the interviews were conducted, and perhaps the way the questions were structured. While the interviews were semi-structured and allowed the women to follow conversational threads that were relevant to them, it is possible that their

answers were shaped by their preconceptions of my research objectives, which were outlined briefly to them through the Information Letter forwarded to the women during the recruitment stage.[60] As such, their responses may have favoured their use of mediated communication, rather than the face-to-face communication which is likely to be associated with couples who live together. This may explain in part why only three of the women with partners talked about using ICTs to connect with each other. For one of these three women, email provided a novel and to some extent playful way to send messages backwards and forwards between husband and wife, when both were working from home during the day:

> People laugh but my husband and I actually use the email quite a bit to contact each other; throughout the day for instance.
>
> *Yeah?*
>
> Instead of making phone calls [laughter]....Sometimes though, you know, like if he's out in the studio and I'm in the bedroom, he will send me an email, you know, like "Come out here, the sun's shining" or, you know, vice versa or something. (Corinne)

Communication between another interviewee, Finola, and her husband, whose work requires him to travel frequently overseas and interstate, reflects another way in which communication technologies might be used within the context of a 'mediated relationship' between husband and wife. While the use of multiple short mobile telephone calls or text messages is most often associated with teenagers' communication practices (Licoppe, 2004, p. 145), it is evident that Finola's husband is also using the mobile telephone to maintain a continuous presence in his wife's life:

> *What about your husband when he's away? How do you keep in touch with him?*
>
> By mobile phone all the time. Sometimes he ... he SMSs me (mobile phone beeps). But mostly he just rings, and that's one of his messages (laughter)!
>
> *So he would call every day?*
>
> Oh lord yes. Even when he's here. Sometimes it drives me insane.
>
> *Just to say hello or is he passing information on?*
>
> If he rings four times a day, two of those will be to pass on information. Two will just be social. (Finola)

In this context, Finola's husband's use of multiple short messages to his wife appears to have as their prime purpose the reaffirmation of the relationship. This practice echoes Licoppe's assertion that

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[60] See Appendix 2 for a copy of the Information Letter.

in the case of a very close relationship, these calls tend to be as frequent as possible because the more that this presence maintained over a distance through mobile phones is continuous, the more reassuring it is in terms of the link. (2004, p. 147)

Finola's communication with her husband provides further support for a recent US survey which found that mobile phones are used extensively by married couples to communicate with each other throughout the day, most often "just [to] say hello and chat" (Tracey Kennedy et al., 2008, p. 21). However, Finola's husband's mobile telephone use also reveals how communication technologies both reflect and perpetuate gender roles and social expectations[61]. As with Rakow and Navarro's research, which found that over half their female survey respondents had been given their mobile phone by their husbands for security and safety reasons (1993, p. 151), it seems Finola's husband's decision to buy his wife a phone was also motivated by concern for her safety:

> So he got me the phone. He didn't like me (laughter) not being in contact years ago. He hated it on wet days, panicking 'cause I hadn't got home and I said "Well we haven't got some milk." So the next day he came home with a phone, so I've had a phone ever since [laughter]. (Finola)

It may also be that at least some women may have felt it unnecessary to refer to their partner during the interview, particularly given the focus in the questions on women's support networks. Comments such as the following by Finola suggest that, at least for her, her partner's support almost 'goes without saying':

> *Who do you turn to when you need to talk over things that are worrying you?*

> Well my sister, for one. Absolutely my sister. And actually my brothers....Obviously my husband, but I mean outside of my immediate, would be... first would be my sister, then my best girlfriend, but as soon as my sister knows, my brothers have been there. (Finola)

As noted earlier, these findings may also reflect in part the methodological approach taken in this research, and the interviewees' assumptions. As such, it would be unwise to conclude from this research that women's communication with their partners does not represent a significant element in women's lives.

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[61] There is some evidence to suggest that as well as enhancing communication, and by extension relationships, mobile phones can also be used as a form of surveillance. In her analysis of mobile phone use in Jamaica, Horst describes how the mobile phone was used by one young man to confirm his suspicions of his partner's infidelity:

> by being able to call at any hour of the day to harass her about her whereabouts, the noises in the background, where her son was, what she gave him for dinner or even why she chose not to answer his call, the mobile phone began to feel like a form of surveillance rather than enhanced communication. (Horst, 2006, p. 155)

None of the women in my research raised the issue of the mobile phone being used as a form of surveillance by their partner, or indeed their own use of the mobile phone to 'check up' on their partner.

6.5   Midlife Women's Friendships and the Role of ICTs

As discussed in Chapter Four, the nature and dimensions of women's social networks have changed significantly over the last 50 years. Historically, women's social networks were focused on kin relationships, with women drawing their greatest support from other female relatives who lived in close physical proximity. However, social changes in the last quarter of the Twentieth Century have impacted on women's personal networks. Even where women have loving and supportive family living close by, women are increasingly turning to close women friends for both intellectual and emotional sustenance. The value of friendships for women is underpinned by the voluntary nature of these social ties. While kinship ties can be immensely rewarding, friendships offer a vehicle for sharing and supporting that is not embedded in intrinsic obligations or expectations: "Because friendship rests on mutual choice and mutual need and involves a voluntary exchange of sociability between equals, it sustains a person's sense of usefulness and self-esteem far more effectively than filial relationships" (Blau, cited in Gouldner & Strong, 1987, p. 4).

One of the dominant themes in the interviews with women in this research project is the degree to which the women value the opportunity to 'catch up' with their friends in person. However, hectic lifestyles, competing family and work responsibilities and increasingly mobile populations mean that many women's social networks must by necessity also be sustained through mediated communication. In particular, research reveals the telephone has become a critical tool in maintaining women's friendships (Frissen, 1995, p. 87; Moyal, 1992, p. 57), either as a supplement to regular face-to-face contact, or as a substitute for it when personal contact is not possible. Indeed, Ann Moyal's Australian study found that after family communication, "the second most important site of telephone networking was between close women friends" (1992, p. 57). As this current research project reveals, the landline telephone is still considered one of the most critical communication technologies in enabling women to connect with family and friends. Nevertheless, this research provides strong evidence that women have also integrated a range of new ICTs such as email, text messaging, and instant messaging, into their everyday communication practices. These findings echo to a large extent the significant body of research built up over the last 10 years which reveals that new communication technologies are playing an increasingly important role in helping women sustain both local and distant social ties (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 120; Boase et al., 2006, iv; Matzko, 2002). In general, the women in this project have appropriated communication technologies such as text messaging to supplement telephone calls and face-to-face encounters with friends and, as the following comments indicate, to organise activities and arrange more satisfying face-to-face meetings: "We do text a lot. We walk, we try and walk ... we text a lot... have you got time for a walk, meet you at four at the steps" (Ellie).

Similarly, email can provide a convenient and time-saving means of keeping in touch with friends, in contrast to telephone calls, which can be more difficult to manage. This is certainly the case for Felicity. Employed full time as the office manager for a busy legal practice, and heavily involved in several voluntary organisations, Felicity's spare time is limited. In this context, telephone calls to friends have largely given way to email:

I don't telephone friends. Very rarely do I telephone friends.

Why do you think that is?

Well 'cause I think when you telephone you've got to have something to say, and I don't always necessarily have something to say. It's just a catch-up. Maintaining the friendship and maintaining the relationship, and also I think we're all so busy that sometimes telephone, well I find telephoning difficult. I find it difficult to find the time myself, and then when you ring people it's often not a convenient time for them. So email is less intrusive. (Felicity)

As well as reflecting the common perception that email is a more convenient channel than telephone, Felicity's comments also imply that maintaining relationships is something that needs to be attended to consciously; a form of emotional 'work' that takes time and commitment, but which is often by necessity squeezed in between other commitments in women's busy lives. In this context, email offers a time-saving and efficient method of connecting. However, as Beth's comments indicate, some women don't view email as an appropriate medium when a more tangible form of emotional support is needed:

Do you tend to communicate by email with other friends?

Yeah, another good friend I have. It's email probably more than the phone, because we know that once we get on the phone we're on it for at least an hour [laughs].

How would you describe the nature of these emails?

Oh, again, nothing compensates for a phone conversation or getting together for a coffee. [Emails are] ... a quick update of what's going on with our lives, and she might say "It's been rough with Mum." You know, if she said that, I'll ring. If it's something, if it's just a quick update of news that's fine, but if there's some indication she needs a bit of emotional support, which you can't do, I really don't think it's [email's] adequate. (Beth)

For women such as Beth, emails and text messages are used as additional channels of communication, to supplement telephone calls and face-to-face meetings. The low cost, and convenient nature of these new media fit well with women's busy lives, and the opportunity to interact on a frequent and regular basis facilitates a deeper engagement with their friends' everyday lives, and helps to construct the perception of a 'continuous connection'. As Licoppe and Smoreda note, the use of multiple interconnected exchanges across a range of media has changed the dynamics of relationships: "Calls and messages become so frequent and their formats so varied that, together with face-to-face meetings, they make up a tightly knit and

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seamless tissue of interaction – a real 'always connected' presence" (2006, p. 309).

While both Ellie and Beth use multiple communication technologies to sustain a continuous connection with local friends, similar patterns are also evident in the maintenance of distant ties. As the following excerpt from Licoppe and Smoreda's research indicates, the introduction of low cost forms of communication provides a platform through which the 'tyranny of distance' can be at least partly overcome:

> Before I had an Internet connection, it was usually she who called me, I didn't call because financially it's very expensive, so I didn't call, and I'm very lazy about writing letters....Whereas an e-mail is different: I connect up, I write her a little note and that's that. (2006, pp. 309-310)

Likewise, this current research project reveals that email can be a particularly valuable tool in facilitating ongoing interaction in situations where relationships have either lapsed, or communication has been infrequent, due to the difficulties of sustaining communication across time and distance. Such is the case for Chris, who in the past has had very infrequent communication with friends who live some four hours' drive away in a rural area. As Chris explained, communication with two sets of friends had been for many years largely limited to "the yearly Christmas newsletter" and information exchanged through the women's parents, who were also friends. Difficulties in finding convenient and affordable communication channels meant that "because of the communication thing [difficulties] ... we'd go for, well really probably without seeing each other and speaking to each other for quite a few years." The introduction of email has 'changed the ball game' for both Chris and her friends. When asked who she emails the most, Chris replied

> Probably a couple of friends in the country. It's easier to email them, now that I'm pretty confident that the 'thing' will fly through the air and get there. It's easier to just sit and type and just send it off than ring them, because being on farms and that, it's quite difficult time wise to catch them 'cause they're always out. You don't tend to ring them at night, because, I mean, I've worked on their farms, and by the time the night comes you're so stuffed you just want to eat, veg out in front of the tele, and to have a conversation [is not appealing]....I mean, if I have to, if it was something that I was organising and I really needed to speak to them and I needed that information right now, I'd phone and try and get through, hopefully if the satellite's working, their mobile, but ... usually, generally you don't. [Also] because I don't have cheap STD [long distance] rates on my phone ... I try not to phone, that's a deterrent, whereas because I've got full broadband, it's no effort to email, and it doesn't cost any extra, and I know they will get it. (Chris)

Experiences such as Chris's are not isolated; indeed, research suggests that women are more likely than men to use email to sustain both local and distant social ties, and also more likely to be employing email to re-energise existing relationships, and to re-establish lapsed relationships (Boneva et al., 2001, p. 542; Matzko, 2002, p. 51; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 18). In doing this, women are not only enhancing the quality of existing

relationships, but are also extending their social networks. Such a dynamic is evident in Gillian's reflections on her use of email:

> Well I keep in touch with my UK girlfriends. Kerry, she is my oldest school friend, and through email we've reconnected, and I mean she's been out here to visit, but she's known me from when I was 10. So I share stuff with her, you know?

> *When you say you reconnected with her...*

> With email... I mean, we used to write letters. But they would be infrequent. But now with email, it's probably once a fortnight, we get in touch. So it's rekindled our relationship, more so, you know? And they've been to visit here, and so I keep more in touch with her and what's going on in the family. (Gillian)

While email remains the major online conduit through which the women interviewed in this research project maintain friendships, several are also beginning to use newer online environments such as social networking sites to keep in touch with friends. For Sherrie, the motivation to join a social networking site came from a desire to keep in contact with a girlfriend who was travelling around Australia. However, as Sherrie found, creating a 'public' profile can attract unwanted attention:

> *So you've put up your own MySpace page?*

> Yeah, well for me to be joined as a friend or something for my girlfriend, I had to sign up, so now ... I've worked out how to do the privacy thing now so that I don't get invitations left right and centre from [young guys] [laughs]... "Have a listen to the concert", and all this. (Sherrie)

Some 18 months after Sherrie's initial interview took place, a second interview explored her subsequent experiences with social networking sites. As the following remarks indicate, with the original motive for joining MySpace no longer relevant, there appears to be little to encourage Sherrie to continue to participate:

> With regard to MySpace, I haven't used it in a long time. My friends who were traveling have returned to Perth so I keep in contact with them more regularly [through other communication channels]. In fact it was my girlfriend and her partner who set up their own [profile] on MySpace so all their friends and family could keep track of their whereabouts. It was a fantastic set up they had. It included a map of Australia and locations they'd visited, when you clicked on the location you could see the photos taken in that area. As for me I occasionally dropped a line to those people invited to the MySpace site my friends had set up for their travels. [They were] daughters of the lady traveling and another close friend, so that's interesting to tap into their MySpace page - very teenager or young adult stuff. (Sherrie)

As her comments suggest, without the impetus of a critical mass of friends and family from her existing social network also using sites such as MySpace, and in the absence of any desire on Sherrie's part to use the site to extend her own social network, the usefulness of such a site for Sherrie is limited. However, as noted in the previous chapter, a recent Telstra survey has found that the proportion of women in the 45-65 age group participating in social networking sites is increasing

rapidly (Telstra, 2009, September 30). As such, it is likely that in the future sites such as MySpace and Facebook will play an increasingly important role in connecting women's friendship networks. Certainly, although Sherrie's participation in MySpace is quite limited, a number of women I interviewed have been active in other social networking sites. Seven out of the 40 women (just under 18%) in this research project have made use of sites such as Friends Reunited to reconnect with old school friends. For some, such as Janette, who migrated to Australia as a young woman in the 1970s, social networking sites not only enabled her to locate old friends, but also to re-establish connections regardless of physical location. In the following excerpt, Janette reflects on her use of Friends Reunited:

> Friends Reunited was a wonderful thing that I got on to five or six years ago and discovered all my old school friends, who I'd lost contact with for years....Girls saying where they'd been, and what they were doing now, and it was wonderful, and so I've got that contact - without Friends Reunited I would never have done that. (Janette)

While Janette's renewed contacts haven't as yet developed into deeper connections, the interviews provide evidence that sites such as Friends Reunited can provide a platform through which more satisfying relationships do emerge. For Zoe, participation in Friends Reunited offers more than an opportunity to reminisce; conversations with an old school friend have proven to be an ongoing source of pleasure:

> It's [Friends Reunited] been great, and a couple of them, the boy that I knew when I was four, and the girl that I knew in the same street, have become regular correspondents now, we're really enjoying writing backwards and forwards....you know, really chatty, fulsome ones [emails] backwards and forwards. (Zoe)

It should be noted, however, that while women's use of social networking sites does in some ways parallel younger people's use, there appears to be distinct differences in the way these two groups experience sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Friends Reunited. While both groups use SNS to connect with friends, younger users – in particular teenagers – tend to engage with these sites as more than simply communication channels. As danah boyd notes, while teenagers are more likely to use such 'spaces' to "hang out" and socialise with their friends, adults tend to use the sites more strategically as a channel through which to 'network' and connect (2008, p. 117). Certainly this research supports boyd's observations on adults' use of SNS; sites such as Friends Reunited or Facebook were more likely to be used as [simply] another channel through which to communicate. Such differences in patterns of use do not, according to boyd, "stem from the technology but are most likely driven by how these tools fit into different groups' everyday practices" (2008, p. 117). For the women interviewed in this research project, the value of social networking sites lies not in the technology's potential to provide an immersive experience, a platform for identity play, or a sense of place, but rather in the networks' ability to provide additional channels through which these women

can continue to nurture and in some cases extend the networks of relationships and connections in their lives.[62]

6.6 Conclusion

These stories documenting the role that ICTs are playing in women's lives reveal the multifaceted and often unpredictable ways in which new communication technologies are becoming embedded in family and social networks. As is evident, the social significance of ICTs lies not simply in the degree to which they facilitate communication, but more importantly, in how they meet the communication needs of women and their families at particular moments in their lives. Echoing David Sless's notion that communication 'ecologies' are framed by four pivotal elements[63] (1995, p. 7), this research reveals that women's communication choices are driven by a complex range of variables that reflect their own level of competency in using multiple communication technologies, as well as the communication channels preferred by their family and friends. These in turn reflect the nature of contemporary women's lives. At the midway mark in the lifecycle, many of the women interviewed as part of this research project represent the pivot point between the generations. Thus, while the women exhibit a keen awareness of the affordances offered by various communication technologies, and are consciously, or in some cases intuitively, employing particular communication channels to manage difficult or sensitive relationships, their choices are also often constrained by the communication needs and/or preferences of their ageing parents and/or their own children.

Nevertheless, there is strong evidence to suggest that midlife women are as adept at strategically appropriating multiple communication technologies to satisfy their own needs, as are many younger people. This is manifested in a variety of ways, from women's use of email as a safe conduit through which to maintain tenuous links with difficult siblings; to their strategic employment of email, instant messaging and webcam to foster a multisensory connection with young adult children living thousands of kilometres away; through to their appropriation of a mix of 'old' and new channels such as face-to-face communication, the landline telephone, text messaging and email, as tools to help them manage their hectic lifestyles and sustain relationships with family and friends. Women's active appropriation of multiple communication channels is therefore critical to the ongoing maintenance of relationships, and by extension, the health and emotional wellbeing not only of the women themselves, but also of their loved ones and friends.

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[62] This section on women's use of social networking sites such as Friends Reunited is drawn from a refereed paper presented at the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) Conference in Brisbane in July 2009 (Dare, 2009).

[63] As discussed in Chapter One, Section 1.3.

Chapter Seven
Conclusion: Research Findings

7.1   Introduction

My goal in this final chapter is to highlight findings that have emerged out of this research as they relate to the primary research objective, which is *to identify the ways in which women in the target group are using the Internet as a tool to manage family and social relationships, and give and receive social support during their midlife years*. The chapter is arranged by key findings as they relate specifically to each of the research questions:

1. *Is the Internet being used by women in the target group to maintain and reinforce existing familial and social relationships?*

2. *Is the Internet being used by women in the target group to extend their familial and social networks?*

3. *Are women using the Internet to give and receive social support, and build and extend networks within which social support circulates?*

However, before launching into a review of the findings as they relate to the three research questions, I wanted to provide a quick overview of the main themes that have emerged from this research in relation to the issue of midlife. Given that this research concerns how a sample group of 40 women are using communication technologies to help them manage the common transitional experiences of midlife, it is perhaps useful to begin this chapter by briefly reflecting back on how the women themselves view this period in their lives. This section then leads in to an overview of the main findings relating to each of the three research questions listed above. This is followed by consideration of the significance of this thesis. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

7.2   Women and the Midlife Experience

This research provides a significant insight into how this group of 40 women are experiencing this period in their lives. While many of these women have faced serious challenges, physically and/or emotionally, overwhelmingly they are looking to the future with optimism. For the most part, the classic transitions of midlife - menopause, the 'empty nest', relationship difficulties and the ageing and death of parents - are, if not always welcomed wholeheartedly, at least managed relatively well,

and with a good degree of equanimity. While it's apparent from these stories that the midlife years can bring with them a range of challenging, and sometimes very difficult and stressful, experiences for women, the interviews also revealed an undercurrent of optimism about this period in women's lives, and, without wishing to sound overly dramatic, almost a sense of repressed excitement. Many of the women I interviewed viewed midlife as a time of renewal; a period when, perhaps after many years devoting their attention and energy to their children, they could start to do things just for themselves. This dynamic is summed up beautifully by Gillian, who explained that the departure of children leaves time to "look at what you've done, or what you haven't done, so it's almost like giving yourself permission."

Of course, it's important to note that not all women experience their midlife years as a liberating period, or as a time that calls for a restructuring of their priorities. In particular, women who have remained childless or who are single may not feel the same need to devote more time to their own needs as mothers who, as Mercer, Nichols and Doyle explain, may have "married much earlier and given their own personal development little priority before this time" (1989, p. 182). Not surprisingly therefore, the non-mothers interviewed didn't express an overt desire to put their own needs first. Nevertheless, interviews with mothers and non-mothers, as well as single and married women, reveal a common theme of recognition of time passing, and a finite amount of time left to achieve unfulfilled goals. For 45 year old Corinne, who married in her early 40s and has chosen not to have children, midlife represents both the end of one part of her life, and the beginning of the next stage:

> I feel… quite split about it because I have times where I feel really, oh my God, I've hit my middle age, so I can be quite negative about it and think… probably classically, you know, what have I done; have I achieved … those classic thoughts. And other times I feel fantastic about it. Like, it's great. And what I do, what I choose to do next is important. That's what I feel is the most salient thing for me at the moment. How I choose to keep creating my life is really important. (Corinne)

Corinne's comments reflect a thread running through many of the women's comments on how they feel about this time in their life; a recognition that they have reached the midway point in their life not only leads them to reflect on what has been, but more importantly on how to make the most of the time ahead. As Raelene explained, "It was like ... turning 50 really makes you think. Like, it makes you evaluate, or it did with me. It was like I really evaluated where am I going to go from here? I want my life to count." For another participant, Robyn, difficulties in her marriage have been the trigger for a reappraisal of her life:

> From when I reached probably 45 to 46, my life just turned around, due to the trauma of my marriage, due to me looking at myself, and thinking, wow, you're probably halfway through your life, and where am I? What have I achieved?....You know, I thought I was a strong person before, but I'm so much stronger now. In that it made me look at how controlled I was. I was controlled as a child from my dad, and then I went into a marriage... not by a dominating, controlling man, but yes, he still controlled my

life, and I allowed it to happen....I found out that I was pleasing everyone else, and the person I forget to please was me. (Robyn)

Notions of women at midlife feeling more confident and comfortable in 'their own skin' are also evident in the interviews, and echo previous research which suggests that in midlife women experience "more inner stability and life satisfaction" (Reinke, 1985, p. 269). This manifests in my research in different ways, with women such as Katrina reflecting they feel "much more relaxed, not as uptight about things as I probably was, once." In other situations, this new-found assertiveness, experienced by the women themselves as empowering and liberating, appears to be somewhat confronting, particularly for partners. When I asked Felicity whether she had experienced symptoms such as mood swings during menopause, she replied

I don't think I'm moody, but [husband] does. But no, I don't think so. But possibly, because I feel that at my age I don't have to put up with so much shit anymore. Whether that's what other people see in me as maybe I am getting a little moody. But in my mind, I have been kind, tolerant, patient, all my life, now I don't have to be all the time. And so maybe I am moody, compared to what I was, but I don't think it's moody, I just think it's not taking shit.

So you're perhaps more assertive about your needs?

Yeah, I think so. And a little more intolerant, and less likely to put up with things. And I think that's damn sensible. I look back and think what a moron I've been, for being sooo patient and easy going and tolerant, really, so I don't see it as a negative, I see it as I'm finally maturing [laughs]. I really see that as a positive. And I don't want to do something, or I do want to do something, whereas before it's "Oh well, do whatever you want to do. I'll do it, I'll pay for it", and now I think, no, not so easy. (Felicity)

However, while overwhelmingly the women who participated in my research *are* meeting the challenges of midlife, there are those for whom the journey is not so easily managed. For some women, such as Anna and Yvonne, physical health issues not only cause ongoing pain and disability, but also underpin clinical mental health problems. Other women are working hard to overcome challenges associated with ageing parents, relationship problems, and difficulties with children and/or other issues they may encounter, such as workplace stresses. At the time of the interviews, three women in particular seemed at a very low ebb in their lives, and found it difficult to look forward to the years ahead with any sort of optimism or joy. However, while traditional accounts of midlife have attributed women's emotional distress at this time in their lives as largely the result of transitional experiences such as menopause (Martin, 1997, p. 246; Wilson, 1966, p. 21) and the empty nest (King et al., 2005, p. 25; Viney, 1980, p. 136), it is clear from my research that the emotional distress these women are experiencing results from a much more complex set of circumstances, and is largely unrelated to the normal transitions of midlife. As noted previously, many transitions during this period in women's lives, such as menopause, the 'empty nest' and the ageing and death of parents, are not sudden events that occur with little warning and minimal opportunity to prepare. In contrast to these age-normative transitions, development theory indicates that the most stressful transitions are those

that are sudden and unanticipated, and which often result in precipitous role loss (Oatley, 1990, p. 78); these events, such as the onset of acute and chronic illness or a debilitating injury, tend to be non-normative events that occur outside of the normal chronological sequence of transitions (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 5).

This research suggests there are two key factors which contribute to how well these women are able to manage either the expected age-normative transitions of midlife, or unanticipated and sudden transitions such as divorce, illness or injury; firstly the presence of social support appears to be a critical element in helping women adjust to changes in their lives, and secondly, their ability to maintain meaningful and enriching personal connections with the people that are most important to them. The following section considers this latter issue, by summarising the ways in which the women interviewed as part of my research are appropriating a range of communication technologies to help them maintain and in some cases enrich relationships in their lives; relationships which in turn are fundamental to their emotional wellbeing.

7.3 Research Question 1: Is the Internet Being Used by Women in the Target Group to Maintain and Reinforce Existing Familial and Social Relationships?

This research provides strong evidence that women are appropriating online communication technologies to help them manage and enhance a range of family and social relationships. Indeed, one of the findings of this research project is the degree to which the use of online channels such as email have become normalised within many women's everyday lives. In itself, this is not particularly groundbreaking, and to a large extent echoes previous research on women's use of email to sustain relationships (Boneva et al., 2001, p. 546; Holloway & Green, 2004, p. 11; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p. 18). However, the significance of this research is that it places women's use of online communication technologies within the broader context of their general communication practices and the social networks within which that communication takes place. In doing so, this research reveals the processes by which women have developed *multimodal* communication patterns which enable them to meet specific communication goals in particular social contexts. It is apparent from the women's stories that communication choices represent complex negotiations and compromises that women work through, often subconsciously, as they integrate newer technologies into their existing communication repertoires. Women's choices are influenced by a range of factors, such as the availability of the recipient(s) of the message, and the sense of urgency attached to a message, the emotional sensitivity of the message to be conveyed, the perceived cost of sending the message, the preferred communication style of the recipient, their own technological competency, and the nature of the relationship between the sender and the recipient.

Of the factors which shape women's communication practices, one of the more influential in determining which communication tool is chosen for a particular communication 'task', is the preferred communication style of the recipient. Perhaps reflecting the multiple roles and obligations juggled by women in midlife, their use of modes such as the landline and mobile telephone, text messaging, instant messaging and other online communication channels demonstrates to a large degree their willingness to adjust their communication style as required, in order to connect with their personal network members. This dynamic is most clearly evident in the strategies women use to maintain contact with their children and their ageing parents. The following section considers the degree to which women are drawing on multiple communication modes to sustain connections with their teenage and young adult children.

7.3.1 Communicating with children: Flexible arrangements

This research indicates that regardless of whether children are still at home, or are living independently, their mothers tend to fit in with their offspring's preferred communication style. Such a dynamic is reflected in Fran's explanation of how she contacts her son living overseas:

> VOIP tends to be with [son], also because they haven't got a landline phone, so VOIP you know is free calls. Whereas if I try to ring their mobiles, it's going to cost them, and also he doesn't have [instant] Messenger turned on very much, because he finds he just gets inundated by people wanting to chat to him. He turns it off. (Fran)

Many of the women I interviewed highlighted the role that the mobile phone, and in particular text messaging plays in helping them keep in touch with their children. Significantly, rather than a conscious decision by women, this use of mobile phones is more a reflection of both the limited communication options available to their children, and their children's familiarity and preference for using this form of communication. Indeed, several women noted that their communication with young adult children is largely limited to text messaging, as their children don't have access to a landline telephone or an Internet connection, and the low cost of text messages is appealing for young people on limited incomes. This may not be considered a problem where women live within visiting distance of their children, and so are able to sustain a meaningful connection through other channels. Such a situation is evident in Lyn's communication patterns with her son and daughter:

> *How do communicate with your children now they've moved out of home?*
>
> Text message. They don't... neither of them have email, and neither of them have telephones [landline]; they just have mobiles, so it's mainly text. And they come around. [Son] often drops in, 'cause he lives quite close to us. Oh well, actually, [daughter] will often drop in too, they both still have their keys and everything, and they just come and go. But yeah, definitely by text. (Lyn)

However, for women whose children live interstate or overseas, text messages are less satisfactory at facilitating a desired degree of connection and warmth. In this context, text messages embody a low level of what Dimmick describes as "sociability gratifications"; those elements

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embedded to varying degrees in communication tools, which are considered necessary for managing relationships effectively, such as conveying care and offering advice (cited in Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 240). As Robyn's interview revealed, where the opportunity for face-to-face contact is not available, the paucity of warmth in text messages makes them a poor substitute for voice calls in maintaining a close connection. To counter this, whenever possible Robyn uses text messages in an instrumental capacity to arrange a mutually convenient time when she can telephone her children – at her own expense – in order to achieve what for her is a more emotionally rewarding connection. Another of the women, Finola, uses text messages in a similar way to overcome time differences with a daughter living overseas, although as her interview suggests, this strategy seems to be used equally by mother and daughter. In this instance, brief text messages are used to set up long telephone calls using Skype. Such a scenario supports Wilding's assertion that new technologies not only offer additional and alternative communication channels, but can also be "used to communicate more efficiently with existing modes" (2006, p. 131).

Just as Robyn, and Lyn and Finola's use of text messaging appears largely determined by their children's communication preferences, so too does women's email communications with children tend to correspond to their children's willingness and availability to interact through this medium. This is particularly the case for women whose adult children are engaged in fulltime work which gives them easy access to the Internet during work hours. In these situations, email may prove to be a more reliable and timely form of communication than mobile phones or texting. This is the case for Janette, whose three young adult children have all left home. With one daughter on an extended working holiday overseas, and two other children living locally, Janette uses a range of communication technologies to stay connected. As the following passage indicates, Janette relies upon a combination of email and text messaging to maintain regular and frequent contact with her two children living in Perth:

> I will email her [daughter]. She's at her computer a lot of the time, so she'll email back, and my son, too, he works at an IT place so he, but, typical boy, he won't get back until later that day or the next day. But yes, [email] communication is sometimes easier than actually picking up the phone, because they don't always answer their mobiles during the day. So I do actually communicate with them quite a lot that way. SMS at the weekend, or, email during the working week. (Janette)

The degree to which email is able to foster a strong sense of connection varies, with some women such as Janette explaining that the convenience and potential immediacy of email messages are pivotal in her being able to communicate in a timely way with children living locally, as well as playing an important role in supporting an enjoyable relationship with her daughter living in the UK. In this transnational context, email sustains what in effect is a "continuous conversation", and enhances a sense of a shared social world between mother and daughter (Licoppe, 2004, p. 138). However, it's important to note that the effectiveness of email as a conduit through which women are

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able to enrich their relationships with their children appears to be determined largely by their children's responsiveness. Many of the women are fortunate to enjoy lively email exchanges with their children, and through these 'continuous connections' their relationships with their children are enriched. However, where children are reluctant responders, limiting their communication to "very monosyllabic" replies, as is the case with Ellie's son, then the usefulness of email as a communication tool through which parent-child relationships can be enacted and reinforced appears limited.

7.3.2   Communicating with children: Women as active communication agents

Notwithstanding frustrations such as that experienced by Ellie, it is important to note that women are far from passive agents in their communication with their children. While mother-adult child communication may be shaped by their children's needs and preferences, such that women may be compelled to rely more heavily upon those communication modes favoured by their offspring, women are nevertheless actively leveraging media affordances to meet their own needs as well as that of their children. This is demonstrated through women's use of text messaging to coordinate longer and more enjoyable telephone conversations with children living overseas, to Gillian's use of text messaging to maintain a watchful presence in her newly independent daughter's life, through to Felicity's use of email to deliver motherly advice to her son at 'arm's length'. Thus women's flexibility in fitting in with their children's preferences should not be misconstrued as passivity; women are as willing and capable of employing communication technologies in ways that will also meet their own needs as are many younger users.

A number of women describe drawing on multiple communication technologies to enable them to successfully sustain a lively and enjoyable connection with their children. This is particularly the case for women whose children live either interstate or overseas, and who are consequently are unable to get together in-person. For these women, email, Internet telephone services such as VOIP and Skype, instant messaging services, text messages, webcam and even 'snail mail' letters and packages are used to support a dynamic pattern of communicative exchange. For example, during work hours Janette emails her daughter "virtually every day", while in the evenings she'll either email or communicate through MSN Messenger, when her daughter logs on to chat to friends. Janette supplements these daily exchanges with fortnightly phone calls using VOIP, and on special occasions such as Christmas both Janette and her daughter set up webcams so they can share the festivities more fully with each other.

Several women talked enthusiastically about the benefits of using synchronous communication channels such as Skype or Instant Messenger, again sometimes combined with webcams, in facilitating an easy and relaxed conversation with their children living overseas. As the interviews demonstrate, the inexpensive nature of Internet telephone services supports a style of communication which stands in stark contrast to conversations using timed long-distance telephone

calls, when the cost of the call was often paramount in the caller's mind:

> [Son] just had it all set up [Skype], so he said, "I'll ring you, rather than type it all out", you know, and sometimes we'd just sit on there for a whole hour, and he'd be answering emails and I'd be doing something in there, that was when we had it hooked up in the room, and I'd be meandering around, "Oh, I'll just get it, hang on I'll find it for you", and then send the website over, or send the photos... "See them?", "Oh those, ok, and Mum can you get me, go to the filing cabinet and get me that, what's the address of that... have you got this... ?", you know, and we'd be on there for an hour, and sometimes he'd say, "Hang on I'll go and find it", and you'd hear drawers banging. So it was just a thing that you did ... very relaxed and casual. And we did it when she [daughter] was over there as well. Just meandered, yeah, we had a great time... same thing. (Ellie)

The degree to which women are prepared to adopt whichever communication medium will provide a link to their children is most evocatively demonstrated through Pippa's story. Disabled in a car accident seven years ago, Pippa quickly learnt to use multiple communication technologies in order to maintain an active and meaningful presence in her primary school aged children's life, first during a long period of rehabilitation, and more recently since her children moved with her ex-husband some six hours drive away from her. Through text messages sent at the beginning of the day, and emails sent when she gets home in the afternoon, to chatting with her children on MSN Messenger, and telephone calls in between, Pippa has been able to sustain a close relationship with her children. In this context, the significance of communication technologies in Pippa's life should not be underestimated, and is most vividly underlined by her response to my question about how she felt about this time in her life:

> I'm completely fulfilled and happy.

> *Can you put that down to any particular thing?*

> Feeling well, and to having a strong link with my children, although I know in my own mind that it still would be too much for me at the moment to care for them. (Pippa)

7.3.3 *Communicating with parents: Opportunities and constraints*

While many of the women are using multiple ICTs to connect with their children, their options for communicating with their parents appear to be much narrower. In general, the women rely heavily upon the landline telephone and, where possible, personal visits, to communicate with their elderly parents. For the most part, this indicates their parents' limited communication options and continuing preference for voice communication. Even where the women have encouraged their parents to get Internet access and helped them to use email, most elderly parents nevertheless continue to rely upon the landline telephone for their everyday communication needs. This dynamic reflects to a large extent the critical function that the telephone plays as a conduit for companionship and support in elderly people's lives, and in turn the important role that midlife women play as key companions and supports for their ageing parents, and in particular for their widowed mothers. As such, even

where women indicated they preferred not to use the telephone a lot, mainly because of time constraints, they nevertheless make an exception for their parents.

However, despite the continuing dominance of telephone communication as a tool for sustaining connections between women and their parents, the interviews provide some evidence of the degree to which online communication channels have the capacity to sustain and indeed enrich parent/child relationships. As Janette's interview reveals, frequent email conversations fostered a closer and more intimate connection between Janette and her elderly mother living in the UK. Having had to rely for most of the past 30 years upon infrequent letters and occasional telephone calls from home, the immediacy and vibrancy of her mother's emails brought Janette considerable joy, and enabled her to develop a deeper and more rewarding connection with her mother in the last years of her life. Another participant, Ellie, employs email as a strategic and 'covert' means of connecting with her father, so that her mother, who seems jealous of the close relationship between Ellie and her father, remains unaware of their ongoing communication. In this context, email plays a very valuable and arguably irreplaceable role in preventing unpleasant confrontations and an unnecessary escalation of family tensions, while at the same time providing a platform to support a very special connection between Ellie and her father.

7.3.4 *Reinforcing relationships: The role of online communication channels in sustaining relationships between extended family members*

The interviews also provide very strong evidence that women are using newer communication technologies such as email to foster stronger connections with siblings and extended family. Several women noted that as a result of email they are now in much more frequent contact with siblings, cousins, aunts, and nieces and nephews. Perhaps of more significance than simply an increase in the frequency of contact is the substantive changes this is having on the quality of relationships. Regardless of whether the emails carry 'newsy' or more noteworthy pieces of information, or are simply phatic messages exchanged throughout the day, they nevertheless have the potential to foster an enhanced sense of familiarity and awareness of each other's lives. Not only does this in turn support an ongoing conversation carried through electronic channels, but the interviews also suggest that the mere exchange of frequent emails leads to a more comfortable quality of communication when family members subsequently meet face-to-face. The potential for email to foster enhanced connections is most clearly evident in some of the women's relationships with their brothers. As Janette and Beth's interviews reveal, it may be that whereas brothers are unlikely to call their sisters, apart perhaps from an obligatory yearly birthday call, they are much more willing, as Beth explained, to use email "to whack back a quick response."

In the situations I've described so far, additional electronic communication channels create new opportunities for richer connections to develop from an existing base of warmth and affection. However, several women are also using email to sustain a tenuous link with family members in

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situations where there is a history of family hostilities. As such, whereas during critical times of stress most of the women value the telephone for its more 'personal' attributes and its ability to foster a greater sense of symbolic proximity, there are occasions when the high degree of social presence manifested through face-to-face contact or a telephone call may be unwelcome, or actually inhibit clear communication. This is particularly the case where a relationship is strained, such that face-to-face or telephone communication may actually intensify any existing antagonism or resentment. Such is the case with several of the women interviewed, who strategically co-opt emails to maintain or repair connections with family members:

> The other thing with email, I have a couple of very difficult siblings, and some other members of my family don't have anything to do with them, and while they are very difficult, I like to just keep in almost safe contact with an email. I don't sort of share too much, but it's just a little line of communication that keeps at least the connection.

> *When you say, it keeps it safe, what do you mean?*

> They've got less chance to twist your words, and while you may not particularly want to risk a face-to-face contact and sort of... [may be] a little bit reticent with the phone too, for whatever emotional baggage that might come up, it's safer with email. (Beth)

As Beth's comments suggest, the paucity of body language and other cues in text-based communication channels such as email may at times prove to be advantageous, allowing the content of a message to be conveyed without the 'static' often embedded in body language and tone of voice, which can sometimes 'derail' clear communication. Several other women have even appropriated prefabricated emails, containing jokes and other generic material forwarded from one person to another, to manage and/or repair fragile relationships, albeit at arm's length. For example, Zoe's use of prefabricated email messages sustains, albeit tenuously, the brittle relationship with her sister, and perhaps prevents it from completely and possibly irreparably breaking down. In this instance, email communication represents a 'safe' medium providing, as Zoe explains, a "non-confrontational way of still keeping in touch", and as such maintains a necessary degree of emotional distance for both Zoe and her sister.

7.3.5 Communicating with friends: Multimodal communication patterns

In contrast to women's communication with their parents or children, where their communication choices seem largely shaped by the preferences of the person they are communicating with, women's communication with friends seems to reflect mutually satisfying choices. These choices in turn reflect the multiple demands midlife women have on their time, as well as their own level of technological competency. Many women described using a combination of text messages, telephone calls, email and face-to-face contact to maintain connections with their friends. Many also express a reluctance to spend too much time on the telephone, and almost all prefer to meet up in person, so often brief text messages or emails are used as a 'quick and dirty' way of setting up

opportunities for more satisfying face-to-face meetings. In between, emails are used to exchange information or 'quick updates'; as such, both emails and text messages can be viewed as acting as additional channels of communication, supplementing more socially gratifying in-person contact.

Most often the participants' adoption of multimodal communication patterns supports local friendships. When it comes to maintaining or re-establishing distant friendships, my research indicates that email can be a particularly valuable tool in facilitating ongoing interaction, particularly in situations where relationships have either lapsed, or communication has been infrequent, due to the difficulties of sustaining communication across time and distance. The low cost of emails, together with the ability to send and read emails at a time that is personally convenient, make this an ideal channel to support long distance friendships. This seems to be the case even where women have the option to use low cost Internet telephone services such as Skype or VOIP; women value email as it enables them to achieve an adequate level of connection without impinging on their time to the same extent that a telephone call might. As Paula explained, "I prefer [email], for the fact I can email at my leisure", whilst telephone calls have a tendency to become "very very long-winded" (Paula)

7.4 Research Question 2: Is the Internet Being Used by Women in the Target Group to Extend their Familial and Social Networks?

In the women's discussions on their use of email to connect with extended family members, it became evident that the networked nature of electronic communications is redefining the communication patterns in some families. Rather than the family matriarch acting as the sole kin-keeper and central node through which family communication is distributed, online channels such as email and more recently social networking sites facilitate a decentralised pattern of communication. No longer reliant on letters sent through grandmothers or aunts, family members are now able to communicate directly with each other. The interviews reveal a dynamic pattern of communication extending across family networks. Not only is this fostering enhanced relationships within generations, but also across generations, as women such as Alex are using email to reinvigorate connections with young adult nieces and nephews. As with emails between siblings and cousins, the increased contact with her nieces and nephews supports a greater level of familiarity, and appears to be the key factor in moving the relationship to a point where her younger family members feel comfortable 'dropping in for a coffee' with Alex.

The interviews also reveal that some women appreciate emails as conduits through which to manage situations that are potentially embarrassing or awkward, such as where a relationship is relatively new or has been dormant for a long period of time, and the women are 'feeling their way'. In these instances, email can provide the appropriate level of connection where a lack of familiarity might make face-to-face or telephone communication awkward. In such situations, the 'arm's length' nature of emails can help to minimise embarrassment for either party to the interaction should their

overtures be rebuffed. A number of the women talked about their use of online channels to rekindle long dormant connections, most often with cousins whom they hadn't seen for a number of years. Whereas extended family members who have lost contact over the years may be unlikely to write letters or telephone each other, they seem comfortable exchanging emails. In this context, the detached quality of text-based mediated communication channels provide an appropriate and safe level of social presence, making email an ideal medium for sending out tentative approaches and allowing both parties to maintain a comfortable emotional distance.

An emerging area in which women are actively extending their social networks is through their participation in the rapidly growing environments of social networking sites. At the time the interviews were conducted, from September 2006 to September 2007, nine women were either currently or had in the past been active in social networking sites, with the most popular sites being those that are dedicated to reuniting old school friends, such as <u>Friends Reunited</u>. Most of the women explained that their initial participation had been motivated by curiosity about what had become of their friends in the years since they'd left school. Several women indicated that once they'd located old friends, and gone through the obligatory "What have you been doing?" exchanges, they found they had little in common with them anymore, which tended to limit any desire they may have had to pursue the relationship any further. However, at least two of the women suggested they have developed meaningful and enjoyable ongoing connections with old friends. Two women also described setting up a profile on <u>Facebook</u> at the invitation of younger female family members, and explained how they are using this site to stay abreast of latest family news. As such, their participation in social networking environments represents another channel through which women are actively enriching, and in some cases extending their social networks.

7.5 Research Question 3: Are Women Using the Internet to Give and Receive Social Support, and Build and Extend Networks within which Social Support Circulates?

7.5.1 *The exchange of social support within midlife women's existing networks*

While this thesis initially set out to investigate the role the Internet plays in helping midlife women manage relationships and access networks of social support, it became apparent from the very first interview that analysing women's use of online communication technologies in isolation from their use of other media including landline and mobile telephones, as well as face-to-face communication, was in actual fact obscuring the real significance of newer communication technologies in women's lives, and the ways in which newer communication options become integrated into existing "communication ecologies" (Sless, 1995). Indeed, as has been noted in Chapter One, some of the most insightful and productive interviews involved participants explaining their communication preferences and behaviours. Significantly, the interviews indicate these women

are strategically co-opting a range of communication tools to give and receive social support; the choice of communication tool reflects both the preferences of the individual women and the person they're communicating with, as well as the social context in which their communication takes place.

Echoing previous research which indicates that face-to-face and telephone communication convey a higher level of "social presence" (Short et al., 1976, p. 65), and are generally considered more appropriate for conveying emotion than text-based communication channels such as email and text messaging (Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 242; Matzko, 2002, p. 64), the majority of participants perceived face-to-face and the telephone as superior communication modes for accessing or providing support. Almost without exception[64] the women viewed face-to-face communication as the 'gold standard' of communication modes, with at least one woman noting that mediated technologies such as email are a poor substitute for the "close connection" she used to have with a close friend "over a cup of coffee" (Beth). Research participants' attitudes towards the perceived superiority of face-to-face communication extend both to social occasions, when, as Beth suggested, personal contact is viewed as more pleasurable than connecting through mediated channels, as well as for occasions when sensitive issues need to be discussed. Indeed, many women suggested that mediated channels, and particularly electronic channels such as email, aren't appropriate when the communication involves content of an emotional, sensitive or intimate nature, or when the goal is to offer support and care. In managing such situations, the perceived degree of social presence of a communications medium assumes critical importance. Reflecting the importance of perceptions of social presence in influencing choice, common reasons put forward by the women for preferring face-to-face contact included the ability to gauge emotion through body language and eye contact, as well as the opportunity to physically express care and support through touch. As Anna explained, "With a face-to-face conversation, touch, including hugs, is possible; someone holding your hand or giving a hug is comforting, giving a sense of belonging, or at least not being alone."

When face-to-face communication is not possible, the telephone is generally considered a more suitable alternative than email for the discussion of personal matters. This perception seems to be driven by two elements that distinguish telephone and face-to-face communication from email and text messaging. Firstly, the ability to hear the other person's voice – to gauge the mood, intonation, and warmth – is considered vitally important by many of the women interviewed, particularly where the conversation is of an emotional or sensitive nature, or they are concerned for the welfare of the person they're communicating with. For women such as Gillian, being able to hear their loved one's voice provides important clues as to their wellbeing: "with making a call, I can ascertain far more

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[64] Only one woman expressed a general preference for mediated communication over personal, face-to-face connections. Fran has lived for a number of years with mental illness, and is to a certain degree housebound by her condition. For her, online channels such as email, instant messaging services and discussion forums have become something of a conduit to the outside world.

intuitively and empathically what's going on than... you see, email is very impersonal, really." Many women also suggested that telephone calls help them to feel closer and more connected, and provide a sense of reassurance that is difficult to replicate through asynchronous email messages. In this context, the telephone fosters a sense of symbolic proximity (Wei & Ven-Hwei, 2006, p. 57) that at least for some of the women closely approximates the physical connection achieved through personal contact. Stella's experiences clearly illustrate the value of the telephone to her during critical times of stress. While generally comfortable using a range of communication channels including face-to-face, telephone, email and text messaging, during difficult periods Stella's telephone use intensifies: "My phone stuff is usually, as I said, is if I'm in crisis" (Stella). Following a traumatic relationship breakdown several years ago, Stella used multiple communication channels to seek support, but it appears the telephone was most successful in satisfying her needs. In explaining why she preferred the phone to email, Stella explained that "you need that verbal feedback. You need that affirmation. And you need to hear it instantly."

Indeed, the need to convey immediate care and concern is the second important element influencing the women's communication choices. Such is the case with 55 year old Janette, who relies heavily upon a range of electronic channels to sustain connections with family and friends spread throughout the world. However, as the following comments indicate, there are situations where Janette views text-based communication as both inadequate and inappropriate:

> If it's something personal ... I would more often than not call them. For example, I've had a couple of friends who've been sick lately with cancer, that sort of thing. I would always telephone call in that situation. I may follow up with an email, occasionally in between, saying "How're things going?", but for me, definitely, *definitely*, a telephone call is much more required. (Janette)

Likewise, when the women are troubled and need to talk to someone, in general the telephone is considered a superior medium to text-based communication channels, enabling immediate access to support and information. When I asked 46 year old Toni whether she would email someone if she was troubled by something, she replied

> I would pick up the phone. I'd speak, rather than [email], because I would, yeah I would definitely use the phone. 'Cause I have that kind of relationship with people that I can do that sort of thing, and I also think that from a personal perspective, you know, I need the answers almost straight away, and I would rather hear, have someone speaking to me rather than writing it, yeah. (Toni)

As Toni's comments imply, the immediacy of telephone communication is an attribute valued very highly by many of the research participants, particularly during times of stress and/or distress when the over-riding desire is for instant feedback and support. This is the case even where a woman might normally be comfortable sharing quite personal information by email; in critical periods of high stress they tend to fall back upon telephone communication. Indeed, as Stella explained, her use of the telephone increases in direct proportion to the amount of stress she is experiencing. This is the case

also with Zoe, a single woman on a limited income, who has several close female friends living interstate. Because of the cost of long distance telephone calls, Zoe's normal mode of communication with her friends is email, and in general she has no problem sharing personal issues in this way: "[emails with] ... two [female friends] in the Eastern States would be very personal stuff probably. Because that's my main method of communication [with them], and I know I can say whatever I want to, and vice versa." But during recent workplace difficulties, Zoe relied more heavily upon the telephone: "but the one in the Eastern States, we used to have phone conversations, rather than email at that point, 'cause that was more, it's more personal." As Zoe's comments imply, in this situation email could not provide the high degree of emotional connection, support, and immediacy that she needed at that time. Moreover, the relatively high cost of long distance calls – a factor which in less stressful times is sufficient to deter Zoe's use of the telephone to contact friends living interstate – becomes of secondary importance when her need for support and affirmation is at its greatest.

Just as Ann Moyal's research revealed two decades ago, the telephone continues to be the key channel through which women give and receive support with their elderly parents. To a large degree this reflects the limited communication options used by most of the women's parents. As noted previously, of those 10 parents who do have an Internet connection, few actually use email as an everyday communication channel, reserving it instead for more instrumental purposes, such as exchanging information or making arrangements. The heavy reliance on the telephone also reflects both parties' desire for a more immediate and direct connection; for elderly parents, telephone calls are likely to represent a welcome opportunity to chat, while for midlife women the ability to hear their parent's voice acts to reassure them that all is well. Women whose parents live locally tend to be in more regular telephone contact than those whose parents live either interstate or overseas. Not surprisingly, they also see their parents more often; in this context, telephone calls, most commonly made every second day or so, supplement weekly personal visits. Only two of the women indicated that email had provided a platform through which a very emotionally satisfying connection with an elderly parent had been supported. As a result of Janette's 'badgering', her elderly mother in the U.K. had taken up email late in her life, and this quickly became the main means of communication between mother and daughter. As Janette explained, frequent emails facilitated a greater insight into each others' lives, and an enhanced sense of connection.

Notwithstanding many of the participants' preference at times for a more immediate connection, or their desire for communication technologies that manifest higher degrees of social presence when they need a more concrete type of support, comfort, or reassurance, the interviews provide strong evidence that text-based communication channels such as email *can* provide a platform through which women are prepared to discuss sensitive or emotional issues, and give and receive meaningful social support. Indeed, as both Corinne's and Katherine's experiences demonstrate, the lower social presence manifested through email messages can actually be an advantage when an

individual is too emotionally overwhelmed or distressed to be able to communicate coherently in any other way. Through email messages exchanged with concerned friends, Corinne was able to share her grief at the loss of her father in a way that would not have been possible through traditional communication channels such as the telephone. Similarly, Katherine used email to keep abreast of her friend's battle with cancer, even while she was living thousands of kilometres away, and extend love and support in a way that met both women's needs at that time.

The interviews also indicate that the asynchronous, 'pull' nature of emails provides a discrete platform through which to offer non-intrusive, albeit targeted support to loved ones. Katrina relies upon regular emails to ensure that a sister who suffers from mental illness is coping, while several other women find email a useful way to gently deliver advice and guidance, particularly in situations where young adult children have developed very effective strategies for avoiding situations in which they may be exposed to a dose of 'motherly advice'! Both Felicity and Ellie described their use of email to extend support and advice to young adult children, particularly sons, in a way that might be perceived as less intrusive and interfering than through face-to-face or telephone communication. As Felicity explained, "if I just put a little bit in an email, [he's] got to read it." However, while Ellie also uses email to connect with one of her sons through his work account, she is very aware of the limitations of text-based communication in enabling her to accurately determine his wellbeing. As she explained, his brief 'monosyllabic' responses to her emails are often "not really very satisfying" from her point of view.

In other circumstances women enjoy a more animated ongoing connection with their children through multiple ICTs.[65] The degree to which women are prepared to employ a range of communication technologies in order to provide support to their children is exemplified in Finola's experience. When her daughter went on exchange overseas as a high school student some years ago, nightly long distance telephone calls allowed Finola to assuage her daughter's homesickness. More recently, Finola has used a combination of letters, packages, email, text messaging and Skype telephone calls to extend support to her daughter as she undertakes a gruelling program of postgraduate study overseas.

Even prefabricated emails, containing jokes and other generic material, which tend to circulate through women's online networks, can be vehicles for supportive messages. While many of the women expressed distaste for such emails, and indicated they rarely forwarded them on, the interviews provide evidence that some women do use them strategically when they feel a friend or family member needs a bit of extra support or care. As Felicity explained, her decision to forward

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[65] In most cases, this involved women connecting with their young adult daughters. However, it should be noted that Ellie does enjoy a more expressive pattern of communication mediated through multiple technologies with another son – see Section 7.3.2 for an example of Ellie's communication with her other son.

what she termed a 'junk' email message was motivated by a friend's particular need for a "feel good" message. While in general Felicity is very reluctant to forward prefabricated messages, viewing them more often as a nuisance, other women use them a little more liberally when they feels friends or family members need a quick 'pick-me-up'. For Ellie, prefabricated emails provide simply another vehicle, together with regular emails, telephone calls and text messages, through which she can offer ongoing care and support to a friend who has recently left her husband. In this context, rather than being positioned as time-wasting messages which are sent in lieu of more meaningful communication, they should instead be viewed as one part of a larger system of support distributed through multiple communication channels.

7.5.2 *Building and extending networks of social support: The role of computer-mediated support*

In general, the women interviewed in this research project are giving and receiving social support through existing networks of family and friends, often using 'traditional' channels such as face-to-face or the telephone, as well as increasingly through new channels such as email and text messaging. However, some of these women have also appropriated electronic channels of communication to extend their support connections beyond their offline networks. While almost all the participants are very comfortable using email, and have integrated it into their everyday communication patterns, a significant minority (just over 25%) identified other online channels through which they have actively exchanged social support. Media such as chat lines, discussion forums, and self-help newsgroups offer women new platforms for accessing and exchanging support. As such, computer-mediated support can act as an adjunct to the support women are currently receiving through existing offline networks, and meet women's information and emotional needs in ways that traditional sources of support may be unable to do.

The potential for anonymity offered through many electronic networks may enable women to self-disclose more freely than they might when conversing with people they already know offline, and thus provides an opportunity for women to communicate in a way they may be unlikely to choose in any other situation. At least two of the women interviewed indicated that their use of platforms such as chat rooms enabled them to step outside their normal roles of wife, mother, daughter, sister; to slough off the restrictions, responsibilities, and the stresses of their everyday lives. For both Sherrie and Robyn, the often playful and flirtatious interactions fostered in chat rooms provided a welcome foil to the problems they were experiencing in their daily life. Moreover, regardless of their motivations for entering these communications environments, it is evident that both these women experienced a measure of support and validation that was not available to them at that time through their everyday support networks.

For other women, the issue of anonymity, or the ability to step outside their normal roles and responsibilities, was not a central feature of their participation in online environments such as

discussion forums and health support sites. For women such as Vicki and Paula, the opportunity to connect with others experiencing the same trauma and health problems as they were had become extremely significant. Both women explained that their initial explorations of the Internet had been motivated by a desire to get more information about their particular problems. Vicki, who at the time of the interview was still coming to terms with the emotional abuse she had suffered in a recent relationship, was motivated by a desire to find out more about her ex-partner's personality disorder, and understand why she was unable to extricate herself from a very damaging situation. Likewise, Paula was driven by a desire to find out more about a serious health condition she had recently been diagnosed with. In doing so, both women stumbled across informal health support sites. However, despite Paula's initial motive being to find more information about her specific health condition, when asked how she felt when she discovered a relevant health support site, she explained

> Ah, when I first found it, it was like a lifeline, just for the fact that although there was no-one else on the site with the same condition as mine, they were all people who understood what it was like to have a ... condition, and that I found was the hardest thing, that although family and friends support you, and go, "oh, you poor thing", it's like the old expression "if you don't have a broken leg you don't know what it feels like." (Paula)

While Paula found comfort in being able to connect with people who shared similar health concerns to her on a more general health support site, when she at last located a site dedicated to her very rare health condition, her feeling of relief was overwhelming. After months of uncertainty as to what the diagnosis meant to her, suddenly, in the time it took her to read a reply to her first post, Paula felt optimistic about the future:

> ...I guess I didn't realise myself how important it was for me to find someone [who also had the condition]....It's put my life into perspective, I think, and things that I was putting off, I won't now ... I guess I feel at the moment I actually have got a life to go ahead with now, whereas before I really wasn't sure. (Paula)

For several of the women, participation in online support sites has also facilitated an expansion of their offline social support networks, albeit to varying degrees. For Paula, engagement with a locally based health support site has extended to exchanging occasional text messages with several local members. Other women have more enthusiastically developed connections initially made through online support sites into rewarding offline friendships. Both Katrina and Lyn have integrated contacts they have made through online support sites into their offline support networks, and now count these people as friends that they connect with through other communication media such as the telephone and text messaging, as well as regular face-to-face meetings. Lyn's participation in a health support site has resulted in the development of a close friendship with another woman who lives locally, and they now meet "sometimes three or four times a week" to go walking, as well as occasionally meeting up for other social activities.

Katrina and Lyn are fortunate in that through their participation in health support sites, they

have made connections with other people living in Perth, and as a result have been able to expand their offline social support networks. Not surprisingly, of course, online support sites also have the potential to bring together people from local, national and international backgrounds, so it may not always be possible to meet up face-to-face. Nevertheless, as Vicki's story demonstrates, connections initially developed through online support sites have the potential to develop into richer and more meaningful offline relationships, regardless of whether face-to-face meetings are feasible. During my interview with Vicki, she talked about email conversations she had with an old friend living overseas. When I asked her whether she felt she gained support from these emails, she paused briefly and then explained about another friend that she also emailed. During this discussion, it seemed to suddenly occur to Vicki that this woman, whom she had initially met in a support site, had at some point in the preceding months assumed an important role in her life, as both a confidant and a friend:

> Actually I've got another friend that I email. A friend in [Eastern States] who's been through a similar sort of thing. Actually... [long pause] she's a friend... but she's a friend that I got through a support group online. And she's been through something similar with one of these sort of men that I've been through, and yeah, we support each other online *constantly*. We also speak on the phone too, but yeah, just help each other along a bit, you know? Sometimes a couple of times a week. I spoke to her on the phone yesterday actually for about two hours.
>
> *Mmm?*
>
> But normally that wouldn't happen. Normally it would just be, you know, we would send each other an email, and say "Oh, I'm having a really down day today", or "I had a really great day today, really getting on top of things", "Spent all day today under the doona" [laughs], and just sort of help each other, get on with it, yeah. (Vicki)

As this research makes clear, the presence, or indeed even the perceived presence of social support, is an important element in women's lives, both on a daily basis, when the knowledge that others care and are willing to help can enhance an individual's ability to cope with everyday hassles, as well as during periods of psychosocial or physical stress, when the emotional and practical support of others acts as a buffer, helping women to better manage their "emotional burdens" (Caplan, cited in Hirsch, 1980, p. 160). Whether these stresses are the product of age-normative transitions such as menopause or the 'empty nest', or whether they result from unexpected events such as health crises or relationship difficulties, the presence of social support can be a critical factor in how well women cope, and how quickly they are able to regain a sense of emotional wellbeing and look forward optimistically to the future.

7.6 Research Significance

This thesis represents a significant contribution to the research literature because it presents a detailed and holistic analysis of midlife women's communication practices and media use. In contrast to previous studies which have tended to focus on women's consumption of individual

communication technologies, such as the telephone or email, in relative isolation from their broader communication repertoire, this study provides a comparative analysis of women's use of *multiple* modes of communication. Perhaps more importantly, this project considers that use within the context of women's networks of family and social relationships, at a time in women's lives when they are likely to be experiencing a number of transitions. Moreover, while it is well established in the literature that newer communication modes such as email and text messaging become integrated into established communication patterns and social networks in ways that are often reflective of established media use behaviours (Quan-Haase, 2007; Wale & Gillard, 1994; Wilding, 2006), the methodological approach adopted in this study draws attention to the micro processes by which this integration occurs. In doing so, this project addresses a claim by Daniel Miller that in order to develop a clearer understanding of *how* communication technologies are appropriated, "what one has to study are not things or people but processes" (cited in Horst & Miller, 2006, p. 7).

As a result of this approach, four key areas of significance have emerged from this research: firstly, women's awareness of the affordances offered by different media, and their willingness to exploit these affordances in order to meet their particular needs; secondly, the extent to which many of these women have developed a multimodal style of communication in order to enhance a sense of connection and intimacy; thirdly, the ability of most of the women interviewed to acquire the technological skills needed to harness a range of new media to meet their specific needs; and lastly, the ways in which this research draws attention to midlife women's key sources of support, and by extension highlights the channels through which that support is given and received. The following sections explore these key areas of significance in more detail.

7.6.1 Awareness and utilisation of opportunities and constraints offered by different media

Overwhelmingly the women interviewed in this project expressed an awareness of opportunities and constraints presented by different media, and a willingness and capacity to exploit these affordances in ways that will best meet their needs, and the needs of their loved ones. For example, women will use the telephone if they feel a more immediate and tangible level of connection, reassurance and support is required, either for themselves or their family and friends, but they are equally adept at harnessing the convenience and succinctness of email, instant messaging and text messaging for communication tasks that are more instrumental, and consequently don't require high levels of social presence. In other situations, women are using email strategically to handle potentially embarrassing, socially awkward or highly emotive interactions – situations where high levels of social presence may actually obstruct effective communication. Women are also exploiting email to carefully craft messages so that they can more accurately convey their thoughts and feelings, as well as recognising the advantages email offers over synchronous communication modes in providing a platform through which they can 'hold the floor', without fear of interruption or of having

the conversation sidetracked by another party. In this context, CMC enables women to more easily transgress culturally acquired codes that prescribe acceptable female behaviour (Conforti, 2001, p. 195), and express aspects of their personality – self-assertion and self-direction – that would normally be repressed in face-to-face interactions (Helgeson, 1994, p. 414). Even prefabricated emails are being employed by women as part of a broader set of kin-keeping practices. Rather than forwarding such emails indiscriminately to everyone in their 'contacts' list, this research makes clear that women's use of emails containing jokes, stories and the like is often very strategic and targeted. In some circumstances such emails are used as additional pathways through which messages of support are exchanged, while at least two of the participants describe using these emails as a non-confrontational way to sustain a fragile relationship when all other forms of communication have become untenable.

7.6.2 *Women's multimodal communication practices: Flexibility and adaptability*

The second area of significance is in the attention this research draws to women's capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and the communication preferences of individuals in their family and social networks, while at the same time working strategically to meet their own emotional and psychological needs. In mapping women's use of ICTs in the context of their relational networks and kin-keeping responsibilities, this research reveals a range of factors influencing women's ICT choices. As noted above, women's awareness of the different affordances offered by different media is an important influence on women's media choices. However, this research also highlights how midlife women shape their communication practices and preferences to meet the needs of important members of their social networks, even as they strive to make the interaction fit their own desires as well. This dynamic is most clearly represented through their communication with young adult children and their ageing parents. As the interviews reveal, many young adult children make clear their preference for text messaging. For many young people newly living out of home, text messaging is often their only reliable form of communication, as they may not have a landline telephone connection or home access to the Internet. However, it is likely that text messaging is also favoured by young adults because it is cheap and convenient, and encourages brief 'to the point' messages; as such, it might be seen as a useful way to communicate with, and perhaps 'manage', parents. While some of the women expressed dissatisfaction with this way of communicating with their children, they have nevertheless found ways to use the affordances offered by text messaging to their advantage. The most common example of this is women's pro-active use of synchronous text messages to set up more enjoyable landline or low cost Skype telephone calls with children living interstate or overseas.

Another way in which women are able to leverage the unique qualities of text messaging can be seen in Gillian's use of this medium to 'keep tabs' on her daughter; in Gillian's case, her use of text messaging enabled her to work her way through some emotional issues she faced after her

youngest daughter moved interstate. The very mobility and immediacy of text messaging enabled Gillian to connect with her daughter, whether her daughter was working during the day, or partying with friends at night time, and the resulting text message provided the reassurance Gillian needed that her daughter was safe and well. In this respect, text messaging provided the connection that Gillian needed to eventually 'let go' of her daughter, and therefore represents a critical "transitional object" (Ling, 2007, p. 62; Silverstone et al., 1991, p. 217) which facilitated Gillian's successful passage through this challenging period in her life.

Other women are enthusiastically adopting multimodal communication patterns in order to achieve an enriched sense of connection, particularly with young adult children living interstate or overseas. Such strategies include women's adoption of webcam, instant messaging, email and/or Skype to facilitate a higher level of social presence, which help to transcend the emotional distance between themselves and their children living thousands of kilometres away.

At the other end of the spectrum, while many of the women's elderly parents may use newer communication channels such as email, they continue to rely heavily upon the telephone for companionship and support. This is particularly the case with widowed mothers, who tend to have the time and desire for regular telephone calls with their daughters. In contrast, their daughters are often juggling multiple responsibilities which mean they are usually 'time-poor'. Nevertheless, they recognise the importance of voice contact as a mechanism through which to simultaneously check on their parents' wellbeing, and offer companionship and support, in between face-to-face visits. However, where opportunities arise, the women are quick to employ newer communication modes to their advantage, as is the case with Ellie's use of email to carry on an emotionally rewarding conversation with her father, without attracting her mother's ire, or Robyn's 'multitasking' use of the hands-free mobile phone to make her regular call to her mother, when she knows she's going to be stuck in the car for an extended period of time.

7.6.3 Women and technological competency

The third area of significance relates to the issue of women's technological competency. In documenting women's appropriation of multiple communication modes, this research challenges some prevailing negative social and academic views on women's technological [in]competence. Indeed, it is important to consider the findings of this research project against a body of research stretching back to the 1980s, which for the most part critiques women's apparent reluctance, disengagement and/or inability to engage with new technologies[66] (Gray, 1992; Margolis & Fisher, 2003; Turkle, 1988; Wajcman, 1991). Even contemporary discourses continue to position women as

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[66] As Gray's account of women and the VCR revealed, women's apparent inability to master particular functions such as timer recording is in some instances a strategy employed by the women to avoid being assigned another domestic duty (1992, p. 169).

technologically inexperienced, incompetent and/or ignorant (Ho, 2007; Telstra, 2009, September 30). And yet, as my research makes clear, many of the participants have incorporated a range of technologies into their communication repertoire, and have demonstrated they are as capable as many younger users of employing 'cutting edge' technologies in their everyday lives. Of course, it is true that a number of these women, including Janette, Ellie and Dana, have been exposed to ICT-rich environments in the workplace, and could therefore be assumed to have developed competency and familiarity through their work experiences. However, this doesn't account for other women, such as Pippa, Finola and Vicki, who have not had the same benefits of working with ICTs, but have nevertheless developed high levels of competency and comfort in using technologies ranging from email through to webcam, Skype and instant messaging, often overcoming significant obstacles along the way. Indeed, this research provides evidence that regardless of the women's personal circumstances – whether they are disabled, suffering mental illness or shouldering onerous care-giving responsibilities – most of them have nevertheless recognised the value of technologically mediated communication channels, and have persevered to acquire the skills necessary in order to use ICTs in ways that add value to their own life, as well as the lives of their loved ones.

Certainly, this research has documented individual struggles in successfully using new technologies, but the overall picture emerging is of women who are much more technologically competent than women in general are normally given credit for. This competency, I would argue, is not only a reflection of women's capacity to adapt rapidly to changing technological environments, but more importantly suggests that their drive to nourish relationships with family and friends represents a powerful motivator for developing the necessary skills in using those technologies that are best able to help them achieve this goal.

7.6.4 ICTs and the articulation of women's social support networks

The fourth area in which this thesis makes a significant contribution to the research literature is in the way it articulates women's social support networks, and demonstrates the role that ICTs play in the enactment of these networks. As with previous research, this project highlights the importance of female friends as key sources of support for midlife women. This is the case for almost all the women who participated in this research: even when women enjoy happy and successful marriages, they are still more likely to turn to their female friends for the sort of emotional support and sharing of experiences which is emblematic of women's talk. Likewise, by the time women reach midlife their mothers are themselves elderly, so that even if they are very close to their mothers, many women are reluctant to burden them with their problems. Thus, it is more commonly through their talk with each other that women are mutually empowered to more successfully negotiate the challenges of the midlife period.

Most of the research participants indicate a clear preference for support which is exchanged through face-to-face interactions, when care and concern can be expressed through physical touch and sympathetic body language. When that isn't possible, the telephone is viewed as a valid substitute, since the voice is considered a reliable barometer of mood and wellbeing. Despite many of the women expressing such views, it is also apparent that some of these same women are also actively using a range of online channels to give and receive support with family and friends. As the interviews reveal, there are situations where online channels are seen as providing a more effective conduit for support than traditional communication channels such as the telephone or even face-to-face. Reinforcing the extent to which social support is increasingly being exchanged through the Internet, over 25% of the participants in this project have used online channels *in addition to* email to give and/or receive support. As with their use of ICTs to manage relationships, women are employing online channels strategically in order to achieve the best outcomes for themselves and/or their loved ones. That is, in determining their media selection, women are judging their 'audience' and the specific circumstances to determine the most appropriate channel through which to offer or seek support. In doing so, once again these women's actions reveal an acute awareness of the affordances offered by different media channels. This is demonstrated through women's appropriation of email to discretely offer advice and care to young adult sons, through to women's participation in online discussion forums and health support sites, where they not only get answers to their questions, but are also able to make connections with other people encountering the same problems. Vicki, Lyn and Katrina's stories provide strong evidence that such connections have the potential to develop into ongoing, mutually empowering relationships which are subsequently enacted through multiple communication modes, including face-to-face interactions. It is through this active appropriation of a range of online communication technologies that these women are substantively enriching their social support networks, and developing with one another the capacity to better meet the challenges the midlife years can present.

7.7   Recommendations for Future Research

By virtue of the methodological framework adopted here, this research is necessarily targeted in its approach, focusing as it does on women's perspectives on the role that ICTs play in helping them to manage relationships during this transitional period in their lives, to the exclusion of other people in their communication networks. During the interviews there were many occasions when I would like to have been able to ask questions of other network members, in order to put the women's comments into a broader social context. Most often these thoughts arose when the women were talking about the strategies and actions they took as they strived to maintain contact with their children. For example, while Pippa makes clear her desire to maintain an ongoing and vibrant connection with her three teenage children, despite being separated by several hundred kilometres, it

is impossible to determine whether her children share their mother's enthusiasm. As teenagers, it might be assumed they are at a point in their lives when the importance of peer friendships is likely to outweigh the significance of family connections. Without including her children in this research, there is no way of knowing to what degree Pippa's children resist, obstruct, or conversely, whether they welcome and encourage Pippa's efforts to maintain a continuous conversation through her use of mediated communication technologies. As such, research that includes data from both parents and children would provide an even richer insight into the role that ICTs are playing in supporting families in the first decade of the Twenty First Century.

My second recommendation for future research relates to women's use of social networking sites (SNS). At the time of the interviews only nine women had participated in any sort of social networking environment, and only two had created profiles on the more popular sites such as Facebook, which younger family members were also likely to be using. It is likely that in the period between data collection and the writing up of this thesis, more women from my sample will have joined SNS, perhaps at the urging of their daughters or other younger family members. I'm personally aware of several midlife female relatives who have created profiles on Facebook, and who now use this site as another way to connect with, and simultaneously learn about the activities of, younger family members. Certainly, women's use of the same SNS as younger family members presents additional communication channels through which family members can interact, and can potentially enable them to gain greater insights into each other's lives and facilitate more meaningful and enriched relationships. However, as danah boyd observes, the "context collisions" (2008, p. 146) that may occur as adults become exposed to representations of younger family members that they may not have been expecting can be potentially problematic, and may actually damage trust and openness between parents and children. Moreover, just as parents are unlikely to be invited into a teenager's bedroom to socialise with his or her friends, it may be that teenagers, and even young adults, develop strategies through which they are able to compartmentalise their social networking activities, such that multiple profiles are developed in order to manage impressions for different audiences. It is more likely however that they will simply restrict their mother's access to their site, so that they can only see certain content. Of course, this also has the potential to create conflict between mothers and teenagers. I therefore hope and anticipate that further research will be conducted with both midlife women and their teenage and young adult children, in order to develop a better understanding of the implications of these communications environments for parent-child relationships.

7.8   A Final Word

As noted in Chapter One, this research project has in part been driven by a sense that cyberculture theory is partially inadequate for explaining the significance of the Internet in contemporary society, and a belief that a range of user perspectives needs to be elucidated in order to

construct a more holistic picture. The notion that the Internet offers a transformative platform - one which is essentially disconnected from everyday life, bodily integrity and normative behaviours - seemed to me to offer only a limited view of the meanings the Internet plays in everyday life. As such, I set out to develop a project more deeply grounded in women's everyday reality. However, so influential is academic discourse on the transformative aspects of cyberspace, that right at the start of my project I was advised to draw on theories of embodiment/disembodiment, and postmodern concepts of subjectivity; in other words, to engage with ideas relating to the construction and performance of female identity in online environments, which feature so strongly in the writings of influential cyberculture/cyberfeminist theorists such as Allucquere Rosanne Stone (1995) and Sherry Turkle (1997). The implication here is that such theories are essential in understanding people's use of online technologies. Even today the early cybercultural theorists' legacy can be seen in writings which continue to link research on new media with the production and reproduction of identity, particularly in anonymous environments. Such an orientation is evident in the following passage from a recently published book:

> digital technologies of the self can contribute to self-disclosure (revealing secrets, confessing…), transvestism (trying on new identities to test the self and the other), fantasising, etc. The fact that most of the others that we encounter online are anonymous, unknown or invented characters creates a "strangers on the train" effect (McKenna et al. 2002) that facilitates all these phenomena. (Abbas & Dervin, 2009, p. 5)

As a result of advice to extend my research, my initial literature review included a discussion on the potentially liberating and transcendent aspects of CMC. However, as I progressed through the interviews, it became very evident that discourses concerning gendered identities in online environments, and the opportunities CMC presents to challenge such socially constructed roles, were of little relevance in explaining the participants' media use. In contrast to Abbas and Dervin's contention that "most of the others we encounter online are anonymous, unknown or invented characters" (2009, p. 5), the women I interviewed are overwhelmingly using online channels to interact with people they *already* know; as such, cybercultural theory's focus on the 'self' as the key unit of analysis draws attention away from the factors which motivate individuals to use online technologies, and the processes and products of their online activities which enable them to give and receive support and sustain relationships.

What this research documents is something starkly different – here we have a story of women who are using the Internet, in concert with a range of other communication technologies, to perform [gendered] kin-keeping responsibilities in ways that are at once very familiar, and at the same time represent new and innovative ways of interacting and managing relationships. We need not fall back on cyberfeminist tropes to explain this dynamic. There is no cyborg-like merging of self with technologies (Haraway, 1991). Nor are these women using new media to escape from their 'real

world' lives into a virtual reality, or challenging gendered roles and subjectivities. Instead, the women I interviewed are strategically integrating new communication technologies *into* their existing 'real world' networks, and in doing so they are articulating even more clearly the networks of connections and supportive relationships which give meaning to their lives at this midway point of the lifecycle. The multimodal communication patterns which many of these women have adopted demonstrate that they are highly sophisticated and intuitive media users, capable of strategically appropriating ICTs to help them negotiate the transitional challenges the midlife period presents. Through their actions women are enriching relationships, and reinforcing and in some cases extending networks of social support, that are critical for their health and wellbeing not only now, but also into the future.

In closing, it is my belief that these women's engagement with communication technologies, including online channels, is as profound, if not more so, in its implications for theory as cybercultural notions of a transformative and subversive cyberspace. As this research has demonstrated, women's capacity to harness traditional and new media, and leverage these technologies with skill and innovation, is in many ways the key factor underpinning their own physical and emotional wellbeing, as well as that of their families, friends, and the broader community.

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Appendix 1
Biographies

Alex (48)	Alex has worked for a number of years in education, but is considering undertaking postgraduate qualifications in psychology. She has been separated for several years, but is in the process of getting back together with her husband. Only one of Alex's three children still lives at home.
Anna (49)	Anna is married with three children, one of whom is now living away from home. Anna worked for many years as a teacher, but following a workplace accident several years ago has had to take on less stressful work. This has been difficult for her to cope with, and she is only now coming to terms with this change in her life. Anna is originally from the US, and immigrated out here when she was newly married.
Berenice (47)	Having had a midlife career change, Berenice is now working as a mortgage consultant. She has three children, although only one is still at home. She has a large extended family whom she is very close to, even though they are located across the world.
Beth (50)	Beth, a mother of two sons, has a range of work experiences behind her, but is currently working as a professional in the public service. She has recently returned to university to upgrade her qualifications.
Chris (46)	Chris is a 46 year old married woman with 2 teenage children. She has recently returned to study, and is enjoying living in Perth after many years living in the North West of Western Australia.
Corinne (45)	Corinne is a happily married woman working in the health sector. She and her husband have no children. Corinne enjoys a range of activities, including reading, gardening, walking and her book club.
Dana (54)	Dana has worked for many years as a senior health administrator in a large hospital in Perth. She has been divorced for a number of years, and has two adult children that have both moved out of home.
Debbie (49)	Having worked for a number of years in the education sector, Debbie is keen for a change of direction, and is investigating a range of options. Single with no children, Debbie is involved with a range of activities outside of work.
Diane (51)	As a secondary teacher working in the private education system, Diane finds her time is fully committed. Married with three adult children who have all left home, she would like to find time to do further study, but at the moment thinks that is impossible. She has, however, become involved in a community organisation, and this gives her enormous satisfaction.

Ellie (51)	Ellie is a married woman with three young adult children, only one of whom is still at home. Ellie is a naturopath, and has a keen interest in the arts and music. Several years ago she went through a period of dissatisfaction with her marriage, but feels she has been able to work through that and is now content with her relationship.
Erin (45)	Erin works as a health professional in a busy medical centre. She has been living with her partner for two years, and has no children. Originally from New Zealand, Erin has lived in Australia for the past eight years. She returns on a regular basis to visit her ageing parents and siblings in New Zealand.
Felicity (52)	Felicity has worked in a range of administrative positions in both the public and private sectors, and is currently the manager of a busy legal practice in the city. She has been married twice, and has three children, none of whom live at home. She has experienced some health problems over the last five years. Felicity is also involved in several charity groups.
Finola (52)	Finola is a married woman with five children, only one of whom is still living at home. Finola is active in a number of voluntary groups, and also has a very busy social life. She is very close to her family, and plays an active role in keeping everyone connected.
Fran (47)	Fran has had a number of mental health concerns over the past five years, and as a result is not working at the moment. Separated from her husband, with 3 children who all live out of home, Fran is involved in several community groups.
Gillian (48)	With two children now living out of home, Gillian is coming to terms with being an 'empty nester', and enjoying her new found freedom with her husband. Gillian has a strong sense of community duty, and is involved in several environmental community-based groups. She also works part-time as a TAFE lecturer.
Gina (47)	Gina is a 47 year old single mother of 4 children aged from 21 to 12 years of age. She has been divorced for five years. Gina works as a part-time sales representative, and is also halfway through an education degree.
Hilary (45)	Originally from Sri Lanka, Hilary moved to Perth from Queensland with her husband eight years ago. Now divorced, and with two teenage daughters, Hilary has recently returned to work after many years as a stay at home mum. She is slowly feeling better about her life, after having her confidence dented when her marriage broke down.
Ingrid (55)	Ingrid has been separated for the past two years, and is the mother of two adult children who have now moved out of home. She has a close knit circle of female friends who have supported her in the difficult period since her marriage breakdown.
Janette (55)	Janette is married with three children, all of whom live out of home. Although she has done a range of different jobs over the years, she is currently establishing her own business, and is also heavily involved in a community-based organisation.

Joy (49)	Joy is a 49 year old married woman with two adult children, one of whom has moved out. Her husband travels widely with his work. Joy works as a nurse in an aged care hostel, but is looking to cut down on her hours.
Katherine (55)	Katherine is a 55 year old married woman who is employed fulltime in a managerial position in the public service. She is heavily involved in a number of social activities, and travels regularly with her work. Katherine has two young adult daughters who live away from home.
Katrina (46)	Katrina is married, with two sons and a daughter still living at home. Katrina works full-time as a nurse, and also enjoys a large range of outdoor activities. Recently diagnosed with a serious health condition, Katrina works hard to maintain her fitness.
Lois (53)	Both of Lois' young adult children have now left home, and she is happily employed in a management position in a national accounting firm. She is very proud of her children, whom she describes as "independent young people". She has been married to her husband for over 30 years.
Lorraine (52)	Lorraine immigrated to Australia from the UK twenty years ago with her first husband and four children. She has been remarried twice since then. Lorraine does part-time clerical work for a local panel beater, and also enjoys dressmaking and gardening. She comes from a large and very close family, all of whom are still in the UK.
Lyn (49)	Lyn has worked for many years as a physiotherapist in the private sector. Married with two children, Lyn enjoys reading and gardening. Diagnosed with a chronic health condition two years ago, Lyn is very conscious of the need for balance in her life in order to maintain good health.
Merryn (54)	Merryn works as a professional in the public service. She has been divorced for many years, and has two children, the last of whom is about to leave home. Merryn suffered a serious health crisis about four years ago, which caused her to cut back on some of her activities.
Naomi (52)	Divorced for eight years, Naomi is the mother of two boys who are still in school, and a daughter who now lives out of home. Although she's had several short relationships since her divorce, at the time of the interview she was single.
Pat (45)	Pat is a married woman who has worked for many years in the banking industry. She has a son and a daughter, but the son has left home to travel through the US. Pat comes from a large family, and has an extended family network living in Australia and overseas.
Paula (45)	Paula is a 45 year old divorced woman, with two children who both live out of home. She has worked as a teacher for a number of years, and now runs a small part-time business from home. Several years ago Paula developed a life threatening health condition.

Pippa (52)	Pippa is the divorced mother of three children, and is shortly to be remarried. Due to a serious car accident six years ago, her children live on a permanent basis with her ex-husband. After lengthy rehabilitation, Pippa now works as a volunteer in a local community group, and is seeking part-time administrative work. She feels happy and contented with her life, and looks forward to the future with her fiancé.
Raelene (52)	Raelene is a married woman with 2 children and four grandchildren. Raelene works part-time as an administrative assistant for a local town council, and is also active in various community organisations. She is hoping that she and her husband can both reduce their working hours so they can relax a little more.
Rita (53)	Having worked for many years as a fulltime administrative assistant, Rita is looking to reduce her hours. Rita, who has been divorced for many years, has one adult son who no longer lives at home.
Robyn (51)	Robyn has been working as an early childhood teacher for a number of years, and is looking forward to retirement in the next few years. She is married with three adult children, who are now all living out of home.
Sherrie (46)	Sherrie married her second husband three years ago. She has three children from her first marriage, which ended in a bitter divorce six years ago. She is currently working as a medical secretary in a specialist practice, and enjoying life again. Her life is kept busy looking after her children, who all live at home, as well as working fulltime.
Stella (50)	Recently remarried, Stella works as an executive personal assistant in a large mining company. She has two children still living at home. Having been through several emotionally damaging relationships, Stella feels she has at last found a man she can be happy and contented with.
Toni (46)	Toni has recently returned to study to upgrade her nursing qualifications, after some years at home with her three children. Originally from the UK, Toni immigrated to Australia with her husband and children 10 years ago.
Vicki (53)	Vicki has been divorced for six years, and has four adult children who now all live independently, as well as three grandchildren. She is still recovering from a period during which she was involved with a man who was emotionally abusive, and is working hard at getting back on her feet both financially and emotionally. She works part-time in her graphic design business.
Virginia (46)	Virginia is a single woman, with two children, one of whom is still living at home. Divorced ten years ago, Virginia has recently met a man through RSVP, and is enjoying being part of a couple again. She works fulltime as a property manager.
Yvonne (52)	Yvonne moved to Perth from the Eastern States with three sons in the early 1990s. Divorced for a number of years, she now lives alone. Currently not working due to mental health problems, Yvonne is involved in voluntary work.
Zoe (53)	Formerly working in public relations, Zoe has recently changed career, and is now pursuing freelance work in marketing. Over the last couple of years Zoe has suffered high levels of stress due to difficulties in the work place, but believes things are improving now. Zoe has never married, and has no children.

Appendix 1b
Who Were the Participants?

Forty women aged between 45 and 55 years old were interviewed as part of this research project, and their experiences form the basis of this analysis. To protect the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms have been used throughout this thesis, and all identifiable information disclosed has been kept strictly confidential. The following table of participants' background information provides a snapshot of their personal situation – marital status, employment situation, whether their children are still living in the family home, or have moved out, and whether the women's parents were still living - at the time of their interview.

KEY

Marital Status	Employment Status	Parents Still Living
M = Married S = Single (never married) D = Divorced	F/T = Full time employment P/T = Part time employment SE = Self-employed Unemployed = 　　　Women, who as a result 　　　of mental and/or physical 　　　health problems, were 　　　unable to work at the time 　　　of the interview	F　　= Father still living M　　= Mother still living F&M = Father and Mother both 　　　　still living

Pseudonym & Age	Marital status	Employment area & Status	No. Children living at home	No. Children living out of home	Parents still living
Alex (48)	Separated	Education P/T	1	2	F & M
Anna (49)	M	Admin P/T	2	1	M
Berenice (47)	M	Admin P/T	1	2	F & M
Beth (50)	M	Admin P/T ; Student P/T	2	0	M
Chris (46)	M	Student F/T	2	0	M
Corinne (45)	M	Health F/T	0	0	M
Dana (54)	D	Health F/T	0	2	F & M
Debbie (49)	S	Education F/T	0	0	F & M
Diane (51)	M	Education F/T	0	3	M
Ellie (51)	M	Health P/T	1	2	F & M
Erin (45)	De facto	Health F/T	0	0	F & M
Felicity (52)	M	Admin F/T	0	3	-
Finola (52)	M	Home duties	1	4	F & M
Fran (47)	Separated	Unemployed	0	3	-
Gillian (48)	M	Education P/T	0	2	-
Gina (47)	D	Sales P/T ; Student P/T	4	0	F & M
Hilary (45)	D	Home duties	2	0	F & M
Ingrid (55)	Separated	Education F/T	0	2	-
Janette (55)	M	SE F/T	0	3	-
Joy (49)	M	Health P/T	1	1	M
Katherine (55)	M	Admin F/T	0	2	M
Katrina (46)	M	Health F/T	3	0	M
Lois (53)	M	Admin F/T	0	2	M
Lorraine (52)	M	Admin P/T	0	4	M
Lyn (49)	M	Health P/T	0	2	F & M
Merryn (54)	D	Health P/T	1	1	M
Naomi (52)	D	Home duties	2	1	M
Pat (45)	M	Admin P/T	1	1	M
Paula (45)	D	SE P/T	0	2	F & M
Pippa (52)	D	Unemployed	0	3	-
Raelene (52)	M	Admin P/T	0	2	F & M
Rita (53)	D	Admin F/T	0	1	M
Robyn (51)	M	Education P/T	0	3	M
Sherrie (46)	M	Health F/T	3	0	M
Stella (50)	M	Admin F/T	2	0	F & M
Toni (46)	M	Health P/T	3	0	F & M
Vicki (53)	D	SE P/T	0	4	M
Virginia (46)	D	Admin F/T	1	1	M
Yvonne (52)	D	Unemployed	0	3	F
Zoe (53)	S	SE P/T	0	0	M

Appendix 2
Information Letter

Dear _____

re: Intended research project: *"The Role of the Internet in Managing Transition during Women's Middle-Years"*

We are currently conducting a research project into the communication practices and needs of midlife women in Western Australia, aged 45 to 55 years, by researching the degree to which they are using the Internet to manage family, social and civic relationships, access and enrich existing social support networks, and develop new communication and support networks during critical periods of transition and potential stress in their lives.

You have been recommended to the research team by _____ as a potential participant. Participation is entirely voluntary. Should you agree to participate in this research project, you will be required to participate in a one-on-one interview, which will take approximately one to two hours. The interview will take place at your convenience. The interview will be audio recorded, and later transcribed. Audiotapes will be erased after they have been transcribed. All information relating to this research project will be stored securely and remain confidential. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to information collected. All personal information collected during this research project will be destroyed at the end of five years.

You may benefit from participating in this research project by developing a greater understanding of your personal communicative practices and needs, and a heightened awareness of the potential role the Internet can play in strengthening and extending family, social and civic relationships. The results of this study may be published in reports, journals and conference proceedings. To ensure confidentiality, all personal information that may identify individuals will be removed, and codenames will be substituted for participant's real names. Should you choose to withdraw from this research project, you may do so at any time, without any penalty or personal disadvantage.

If you would like to participate in this exciting new research, or have any questions or require any further information about the research project, please contact Julie Dare on either ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮, or via email at jsdare@student.ecu.edu.au. Julie is doing this research as part of the requirements of her PhD studies at Edith Cowan University. You can also speak to Professor Lelia Green at Edith Cowan University. Professor Green's contact details are provided below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact:

Research Ethics Officer
Edith Cowan University
100 Joondalup Drive
JOONDALUP WA 6027
Phone: (08) 6304 2170
Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

This research project has been approved by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

If we don't hear from you, we may give you a quick call to see what you think about our project.

Thankyou.

Julie Dare: Researcher	Prof. Lelia Green: Supervisor
Edith Cowan University	Edith Cowan University
Faculty of Education and Arts	Associate Dean Research & Higher Degrees
School of Communications and Contemporary Arts	Faculty of Education and Arts
███████████████	9370 6204
	l.green@ecu.edu.au

Appendix 3

Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
(Please complete and return to ECU in the envelope provided)
(Duplicate to remain with participant)

The Role of the Internet in Managing Transition during Women's Middle-Years

I _____ have read the information letter which was sent to me on the _____ and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that should I have any further questions I may contact members of the research team. I agree to participate in this activity, realising I may withdraw at any time without any penalty or disadvantage to myself. I understand that participation in this research project will involve being interviewed, and that this interview will be audio recorded. I understand that after transcription the audiotapes will be erased. I understand that, on average, I will only need to give up about 2 hours of my time answering questions for this research project. I understand that all information gathered during this research project will remain confidential. I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided I am not identifiable.

Participant's Signature_____Date_____

Investigator's Signature_____Date_____

Julie Dare: Researcher	Prof. Lelia Green: Supervisor
Edith Cowan University	Edith Cowan University
Faculty of Education and Arts	Associate Dean Research & Higher Degrees
School of Communications and Contemporary Arts	Faculty of Education and Arts
███████	9370 6204
jsdare@student.ecu.edu.au	l.green@ecu.edu.au

Appendix 4a

Initial Interview Questions

The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Managing Transition and Sustaining Women's Health during their Midlife Years

Interviewee...   **Date...........................**

Introduction to topic:
- I'm conducting research into the ways that midlife women in Western Australia use the Internet to maintain relationships, and in some cases forge new relationships. This research will also consider whether women use the Internet to access and enrich networks of social support.

Introduction to Interviewing:
- Participation is voluntary; you are free to withdraw or decline to answer questions at any time, without penalty or disadvantage. If it's ok with you, the interview will be digitally recorded, and I may also take notes, to jog my memory later when transcribing.

- Please feel free to indicate if you are uncomfortable with any of the questions or topics, or would prefer certain parts of the interview not to be recorded. If you have any questions during the interview, or are unclear about anything, please feel free to ask at any time.

- All identifying information will be removed from transcripts and final report. Participants will be referred to by pseudonyms, and other identifying information such as names of workplaces etc will be changed or referred to generically.

- What I'm most particularly interested in learning is *your* experiences and attitudes towards the role the Internet plays in your communication practices, so feel free to elaborate as much as possible. During the interview, it's ok for you to take your time in formulating a response or in considering how you feel about a particular question or issue – don't feel rushed into answering.

- Please read and sign consent form and copy

Interview questions:

<u>**Personal data**</u>
- To provide some contextual background, can you please tell me a little about yourself – a brief bio... – age, marriage status, children, work, education, non-work related activities, volunteer activities

- Can you describe for me who you turn to for emotional support – maybe in times of crisis, difficulty, or when you just need someone to talk to?

- Do you have any health issues related to menopause? Any other concerns with menopause, or any other things happening at this stage in your life?

<u>**Internet use overview**</u>
- Can you tell me / describe for me how you use the Internet on a typical day (for purposes not related to work) – for what purposes do you use the Internet?

<u>**Email**</u>
- Who do you email the most – family, friends? Local, interstate, international?

- Regularity of email activity - daily, weekly etc.?

- What other communication channels do you use (eg. telephone, face-to-face, letters, Skype, Instant messenger, etc.?)

- Are emails replacing, or supplementing other forms of communication - eg. telephone calls?
o Why do you think this is?

- Do you email people you would not normally communicate with on a regular basis? Why?

- Can you describe the nature of email messages you send – style & purpose
o Instrumental
o Intrinsic–personal communication with relatives, friends / intimate discussion & exchange
o can you think of examples of your use of instrumental & intrinsic email messages?

- Do you send or receive group emails – if so, who do you send/receive them from? What is your attitude towards them?

Discussion forums / Online support sites / Internet Chat

- Can you describe the nature of these activities – what type of forum, newsgroup, etc. appeals to you and why – health related, political, other special interest?

o Are they mixed sex?

- How did you find out about the forums you use?
o Did you link to them from the home page of a formal organisation; were you referred to them; did you find them through surfing?

- How often do you participate?

- Do the connections you make online extend offline?

- Do you feel your chat activity impacts on your offline life?

Online dating

- Have you ever used an online dating site such as RSVP?
o If so, what was your experience?
o If not, is there any specific reason why you would not use an online dating service?

- Have you ever met a partner through chats on newsgroups or forums etc?
o If so, what was your experience?

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General questions

- Do you believe your pattern of Internet usage differs from your husband/partner? How? Why do you think this is the case?

- How important is the Internet to you in your daily life?

- Does the medium encourage the discussion of personal and intimate questions, feelings, experiences; does it enable you to talk more freely; or are you aware of carefully checking what you are writing before sending the message?

Conclusion

- Is there anything further you'd like to add that I haven't touched on, or anything you'd like to elaborate on?

- Can you think of any questions I haven't included that would have been relevant? Do you think any questions could have been reworded to make them clearer, or could have been left out as they were irrelevant?

- Did you find any part of the interview difficult, or can you suggest any changes that may improve the interviewing process?

- Do you have any other questions about this research project?

- Do you know any other women who meet the criteria, who might be happy to be interviewed?

Thankyou!

Appendix 4b

Revised Interview Questions

The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Managing Transition and Sustaining Women's Health during their Midlife Years

Interviewee...   Date...........................

Introduction to topic:
- I'm conducting research into the ways that midlife women in Western Australia use the Internet to maintain relationships, and in some cases forge new relationships. This research will also consider whether women use the Internet to access and enrich networks of social support

Introduction to Interviewing:
- Participation is voluntary; you are free to withdraw or decline to answer questions at any time, without penalty or disadvantage. If it's ok with you, the interview will be digitally recorded, and I may also take notes, to jog my memory later when transcribing.

- Please feel free to indicate if you are uncomfortable with any of the questions or topics, or would prefer certain parts of the interview not to be recorded. If you have any questions during the interview, or are unclear about anything, please feel free to ask at any time.

- All identifying information will be removed from transcripts and final report. Participants will be referred to by pseudonyms, and other identifying information such as names of workplaces etc will be changed or referred to generically.

- What I'm most particularly interested in learning is *your* experiences and attitudes towards the role the Internet plays in your communication practices, so feel free to elaborate as much as possible. During the interview, it's ok for you to take your time in formulating a response or in considering how you feel about a particular question or issue – don't feel rushed into answering.

- Please read and sign consent form and copy

Interview questions:

<u>**Personal data**</u>
- To provide some contextual background, can you please tell me a little about yourself – a brief bio... – age, marriage status, children, work, education, non-work related activities, volunteer activities

- Can you describe for me who you turn to for emotional support – maybe in times of crisis, difficulty, or when you just need someone to talk to?

- Do you have any health issues related to menopause? Any other concerns with menopause?

- Can you tell me how you feel about yourself and your personal situation at this point in your life?

<u>**Internet use overview**</u>
- Can you provide an overview of how you use the Internet on a typical day (non-work related)

Email

- Who do you email the most – family, friends? Local, interstate, international?

- Regularity of email activity - daily, weekly etc.?

- Can you describe the nature of email messages you send – style & purpose
    - Instrumental
    - Intrinsic–personal communication with relatives, friends / intimate discussion & exchange
    - can you think of examples of your use of instrumental & intrinsic email messages?

- What other communication channels do you use (eg. telephone, face-to-face, letters, Skype, Instant messenger, etc.?)

- Are emails replacing, or supplementing other forms of communication - eg. telephone calls?
    - Why do you think this is?

- Do you email people you would not normally communicate with on a regular basis? Why?

- Do you send or receive group emails – if so, who do you send/receive them from? What is your attitude towards them?

Discussion forums / Online support sites / Internet Chat
- Can you describe the nature of these activities – what type of forum, newsgroup, etc. appeals to you and why – health related, political, other special interest?

- How did you find out about the forums you use?
  - o Did you link to them from the home page of a formal organisation; were you referred to them; did you find them through surfing?

- How often do you participate?

- Do the connections you make online extend offline?

- Do you feel your participation impacts on your life?

Online dating
- Have you ever used an online dating site such as RSVP?
    - If so, what was your experience?
    - If not, is there any specific reason why you would not use an online dating service?

- Have you ever met a partner through chats on newsgroups or forums etc?
    - If so, what was your experience?

General questions
- Do you believe your pattern of Internet usage differs from your husband/partner? How? Why do you think this is the case?

- How important is the Internet to you in your daily life? Can you explain why it is, or is not, important?

- Does the medium encourage the discussion of personal and intimate questions, feelings, experiences; does it enable you to talk more freely; or are you aware of carefully checking what you are writing before sending the message? Can you explain why?

Conclusion
- Is there anything further you'd like to add that I haven't touched on, or anything you'd like to elaborate on?

- Can you think of any questions I haven't included that would have been relevant? Do you think any questions could have been reworded to make them clearer, or could have been left out as they were irrelevant?

- Did you find any part of the interview difficult, or can you suggest any changes that may improve the interviewing process?

- Do you have any other questions about this research project?

- Do you know any other women who meet the criteria, who might be happy to be interviewed?

Thankyou!