Intimate mobile connections: A tool for intimacy

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Abstract

The telephone has long been understood to be a communication tool with personal attributes (Fischer 1992). The use of a mobile phone for intimate personal communication echoes and extends these uses of the telephone. This paper explores the ways in which mobile phone owners use their telephones to connect with those who are important to them. It examines the ways that mobile phones play integral roles for individuals in their relationship building and shows how mobile phones are deeply integrated into the private and intimate everyday lives of people. This paper details some of the results from a research project that focused on the meanings given, and used with mobile phone practices in Australia. The research was concerned with Communication as socially constructed. Discourse Analysis was chosen as a guiding methodology in order to focus on "texts" that revealed emerging patterns of meaning and use related to mobile phones. Interviews, collected cultural artefacts and a Research Journal provided the primary material, and Discourse Analysis was used to consider each source of information and to compare them.

Introduction

The telephone has long been understood to be a communication tool with personal attributes (Fischer, 1992). In the book, *America calling: A social history of the telephone to 1940*, Fischer reveals how the landline telephone was commonly used in the 1900s for keeping in contact with friends and family, and for "sustaining social relationships" (Fischer, 1992, p. 225). The use of a mobile phone for intimate personal communication echoes and extends these uses of the landline. The owners of mobile phones use their phones to be in contact with those they care for; this is indicated by the vast number of calls made and text messages sent on Valentine's Day, Christmas Day and New Years Eve. For example, in 2005 a major Australian telecommunications company, Telstra, reported that "6.8 million SMS messages were exchanged on Valentine's Day" (Legge, 2005, p. 30). Three years later in 2008, Megan Keleher, the Telstra Segment Director predicted that "close to 17 million text messages will be sent—an increase of 14 per cent compared to a standard day in February" (Telstra, 2008, para. 4). It was also reported in the *Sunday Territorian* (2006, p. 5) that 23 million text messages were sent on Christmas Day in 2006. And for the same New Year's Eve, the mobile phone network capacity was *increased* (by Telstra) at "hotspots" across Australia to manage the "estimated 32 million text messages" and estimated 22 million calls (in the one-hour lead up to midnight) to be sent and made by mobile phone owners (*Sunday Territorian*,

2006, p. 5). This paper explores the ways in which mobile phone owners use their telephones to connect with those who are important to them. It examines the ways that mobile phones play integral roles for individuals in their relationship building and shows how mobile phones are deeply integrated into the private and intimate everyday lives of people. The paper also reveals that the sense of connection people have with their phones is intense (even where use is minimal).

Research methods

This paper details some of the results from a research project that focused on the meanings given, and used, with mobile phone practices in Australia. The larger research project that this paper draws on was concerned with communication as socially constructed and discourse analysis was used as both a method and guiding theory. Discourse has been used as the conceptual framework for the research and the activities developed for the project were designed in order to carry out a comprehensive discursive analysis. For the purposes of this research, discourse analysis is accepted to be the investigation of the processes of how the social construction of meaning is made (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Following this, "discourse" is understood to be the process of socially constructing a set of interconnected and relatable texts "that brings an object into being" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 3). Discourse analysis was used as a particular way to explore the operation of emerging mobile phone communication practices (the discourse of mobile phone use) in relation to other discourses, and for the purpose of forming and expressing personal identity.

Triangulation was used with multiple sources of evidence to reveal the discourse/s of mobile phone use. Those employed in this project involved: semi-structured interviewing; a reflexive research journal (Lloyd, 2009); and the collection of cultural artefacts from the broader material culture. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 participants during 2006 and 2007. In total there were 10 male and 8 female participants. Participants were aged 18 to 35, and came from the Hunter region in NSW Australia (see Table 1).

The discourse analysis methods applied in this paper integrate the micro and macro contexts of communication. They work at an individual level, with the intent of tracing personal experiences and uses of the mobile phone (hence the use of interviews—personal accounts), in relation to information and wider held beliefs about mobile phone use (hence the analysis of "mobile phone" cultural artefacts while the research was taking place) (Blommaeart, 2005, p. 28). These were augmented with observations from a research journal (used to enhance reflexivity within the research) (Lloyd, 2009).

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Table 1

	Name	Age	Profession
1	Martin	20	Hospital administrator & part-time sign language interpreter.
2	Richard	20	Communication/Law university student & works in law firm.
3	Kathy	20	Enrolled nurse & university nursing student.
4	Alison	21	Sociology Honours student & works in a photography laboratory.
5	Melinda	26	Works in accounts & studies at herbal medicine college.
6	Jillian	24	Casual high school teacher.
7	Tom	32	Information Technology Research Higher Degree university student.
8	Amy	19	Communication university student & sales assistant.
9	Michael	25	Musician.
10	Mary	28	Research Assistant in hospital.
11	Warwick	31	Electrician, musician & hobby horticulturalist.
12	Nathan	32	Works in welfare & part-time university student.
13	Jason	20	Research Assistant & IT support at university, & science university student.
14	Logan	35	Tradesman & undertaking further vocational training.
15	Adam	23	Finance & mathematics university student.
16	Ron	21	Aviation mechanical engineer apprentice & musician.
17	Melissa	26	Theatre History Honours student.
18	Rebecca	35	Single mother & just completed a Bachelor of Arts (Special Ed.).
	Average	25.44	

Relevant Literature

Over the past ten years, the use of mobile telephony for intimate communications has been well documented (Ling & Yttri, 2002a; Prøitz, 2004a; 2004b; 2005a; 2007b; Rheingold, 2003; Thurlow, 2003; Vincent, 2005a; 2005b; 2006). For example, Geser has drawn on research from Fortunati (2002a) and Plant (2000) to illustrate how mobile phone use may reinforce social bonds between close kin and friends from a person's "inner circle" (Geser, 2004, p. 12). Ito and Okabe, too, suggest that text messages are a "means of experiencing a sense of private contact and co-presence with a loved one" (2005, p. 265). Several researchers have proposed that text messages are chiefly sent and received between people with close ties (Hulme, 2008; Licoppe, 2004; Matsuda, 2005; Taylor & Harper, 2003). Other researchers have discussed the ways mobile phone communication can be used to initiate and maintain social bonds (Ling & Yttri, 2002a; Pertierra, 2005), and considered that frequent contact may be increased through mobile communication, which may in turn increase intimacy in relationships (Fortunati, 2002a), and further enhance the connectedness that text messages can create (Rettie, 2007).

In Australia, Byrne and Findlay studied the differences between genders in their preferences for text messages over phone calls in initiating romantic relationships (for heterosexual individuals). Byrne and Findlay's study is significant to this research for

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two reasons; firstly, as it is an Australian study and, secondly, because the mean age for their 266 participants was 28-years-old (2004, p. 48), a similar mean age to this research. Their study used a self-reporting online questionnaire about how relationships were initiated. The researchers concluded that

> while SMS appears to have somewhat influenced the manner in which romantic first moves are initiated, traditional gender role expectations and preference for telephone communication are still strong when initiating first dates. (Byrne & Findlay, 2004, p. 48)

While the results of this study are valuable, no explanation for why and how the preferred choices were made by males or females is provided. The survey method limited the kind of data that became available.

Another Australian study, by Horstmanshof and Power, also investigated the use of text messaging in relationships (2005). Horstmanshof and Power's qualitative study included 20 participants (3 male) in 5 focus groups and their study confirms that text messages were mostly sent between persons with close-tie relationships (2005, p. 38). Horstmanshof and Power maintain that "SMS use is an example of [individuals] adapting and appropriating technology intended for other purposes to social ends" (2005, p. 38). The broad themes revealed through their research data were control, privacy, and access. That is, participants in the study wanted to be able to control their communication with others, they also wanted to be able to protect their personal privacy, and objections were made when they considered a breach of their privacy had been made by businesses contacting them to retain customers or to establish new business (Horstmanshof & Power, 2005). Importantly, Horstmanshof and Power's study suggested that "new norms and expectations for establishing and being available for contact [were] being developed" (2005, p. 36).

Prøitz has also considered the use of intimate text messages by teenage Norwegians. When exploring the construction of gender, sexuality and subjectivity in young Norwegians' mobile phone practices, Prøitz found the term "love project" to be "valuable as it emphasises the constructed aspects of sexual romantic negotiations" (Prøitz, 2005b, para. 104), whist also signifying that an understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality includes "acts, expressions, [and] communication or language" (Prøitz, 2005b, para. 104). Prøitz revealed that, within the context of "love project" text messages, the teens worked within a certain set of expected norms to ascertain times for expected responses. That is, there was a timeframe for reciprocating a text message that was acceptable and not acceptable. Prøitz noted that "the significance of keeping to the accepted time seems to be particularly important in the early phase of a love-project" (2005b, para. 68).

> At this crucial point of the love-project, a couple of minutes would be the most common, expected and *accepted* text message-transfer time—or as the nineteen years informant Kristian says: "you most likely sit and count the seconds". Hence, if they exceed this time, most of the informants say they try to make up a reasonable explanation for themselves in order to reduce their rising anxiety. (Prøitz 2005b, para. 68, emphasis in original)

Licoppe has also studied the use of the mobile phone in intimate communications. His key foci are the various communication practices that individuals use to create and sustain social and intimate bonds. In particular, he explored the telephone communication repertoire available to individuals in France. To do so, Licoppe integrated multiple studies, including both the domestic landline and the mobile telephone, to reveal how personal relationships are managed and mediated via the two.

The researcher was interested in how individuals support relationships when there is a physical distance between them. He argued that rather than technologies being used to

> compensate for the absence of our loved ones, [they] are exploited to provide a continuous pattern of mediated interactions ... in which the boundaries between absence and presence eventually get blurred. (2004, p. 136)

Importantly, Licoppe suggests a new relational implication as an outcome of the constant contact and accessibility the technology use enables (Licoppe, 2004, p. 45), and describes these developments as "connected relationships" (2004, p. 145). He reveals that landlines are generally used for phone calls of a longer length and are not made as frequently, and explains that mobile phone calls are often more frequent and for shorter period of times. Furthermore, Licoppe argues that the shorter and more frequent mobile calls help constitute a "connected" presence, which is important in the maintenance of strong tie relationships. What is both interesting and important in Licoppe's work is that he indicates (if only at a very general level) how both forms of telecommunications (the landline and the mobile phone) are treated and perceived differently in France by the individuals who use them in their daily lives.

Substitution: A tool for shrinking a physical distance

The role of the mobile phone in a person's intimate relationship is particularly significant when a person longs to establish communication and connect with someone who is physically absent. In these exchanges, the mobile phone is used to virtually shrink the existing physical distance and the mobile may facilitate a sense of the self, as well as the other through this process: it "becomes an offering of commitment to the relationship" (Taylor & Harper, 2003, p. 275). The researcher also noted that she used her mobile phone to sustain an intimate relationship. This was observed and recorded in the research journal during a conference trip away in 2006. During this one week away, the mobile phone was regularly used in bed late at night to connect and communicate with her partner who was approximately 1500kms away. Sleepily, they would speak or text message via their mobile phones until their final goodnights, with the mobile often being placed either on, or next to the bed. The research journal entry read:

> Late at night [partners name] and I spoke on mobile—fell asleep with it in bed on occasion—used it every night—because he wasn't there. (Research journal, July 9, 2006).

This example from the research journal highlights the point that, when the mobile phone is the object used to unite two people over distance—connecting a person with an intimate other—it becomes an *object of intimacy*. The example also demonstrates how it may become associated with, and stands for, an individual. These actions may also leave traces of intimacy—meaning that the messages saved and the call register list function as material evidence of another individual contacting and connecting with that person.

The connecting and substituting aspects of mobile phone use were seen in the television series *Jamie's Great Italian Escape*, when celebrity chef Jamie Oliver took his mobile phone to bed with him (under the covers) after talking with his wife (Oliver, 2005). Jamie Oliver was clearly not just interested in the mobile's functional aspects and the traces that it leaves. His actions revealed that there was also "embodied meaning and ritual" (Taylor & Harper, 2003) in the act of calling his absent wife, while he was also

substituting the mobile for her absent presence. This pivotal aspect of mobile phone use has not gone unnoticed by service providers, who use this quality to directly market their service—e.g. the Three and LG "pillow talk" advertisement in the women's magazine *Cleo* is indicative of this concept. In this glossy colour magazine advertisement, predominant imagery is used to suggest the use of mobile phones in bed. The advertisement contains two mobile phones, one pink and the other silver. The two phones are clearly positioned in a bed surrounded by white bed sheets and the silver phone has residue of red lipstick kisses on its case. Below the two mobile phones reads the text "Pillow talk" (Three & LG, 2006, p. 64). The media representation—i.e. the use of this imagery combined with the advertisement copy—are an unambiguous merging of social and personal discourses.

The use of the mobile phone to connect with and substitute for an intimate other was also spoken about by participants in this research. Michael explained how the mobile phone had played a part in evoking the desire to be with the person they were speaking with via the mobile phone. He said:

> It would generally be in the romance department, or someone who is sick, or someone who is far away, and you just sort of, maybe if it's a voice conversation you might feel like you're getting on a roll and you just wish they were in the room and then you could see them, those sort of, you know if the conversation's good it will evoke memories and you just want to see them, yeah (Michael).

> Oh usually late at night (laughs), maybe you're away from your friends or family or something like that, you know you're in unfamiliar surroundings something like that, sometimes you ring people 'cause you want to be there with them (Ron).

Participants in this research commonly used their mobile phones to have "co-presence" (Ito, 2005) or "absent presence" (Licoppe, 2004) when they were physically distant from a loved one. When asked if they had used their mobile phones to feel closer to someone, participants often referred to use of their mobile phones occurring when the "other" person was a long physical distance away, such as overseas. For instance, Mary commented that she used her mobile, "a lot of the time with people who are overseas or that, yeah a distance thing". Nathan had also used his mobile to feel closer to someone when they were separated because one of them was abroad:

> I was dating a girl in Sweden and she was, in fact she was in Sweden and I was in England . . . a lot of the time it's generally if someone's quite a distance away.

One participant, whose girlfriend was overseas at the time of the interview, said that he and his girlfriend frequently used their mobile phones to communicate. Adam stated that he believed face-to-face contact would be the best way to connect but, because this was not an option whilst she was overseas, to hear her voice was the next best alternative. He commented, however, that they regularly compromised and chose to use text messages to connect because they were cheaper than calling, which meant that they could communicate more often (this is also possibly due to time differences and because SMS is asynchronous). Adam and his girlfriend used their mobile phones to have "absent presence". Their use of frequent, but brief, contact was used to minimise the sense of physical distance between them. Their mobile communication was continuous and it helped "to maintain the feeling of a permanent connection" (Licoppe, 2004, p. 141). This communication served to sustain the relationship over the physical distance by creating "an impression that the link [could] be activated at any time and

that one [could] thus experience the other's engagement in the relationship at any time" (Licoppe, 2004, p. 141). Adam said:

> Well at the moment she lives overseas, it's free for me to text [message] her, as it just costs ten cents or whatever, but for her to text [message] back its seventy-five cents. So I said, "I don't need you to be constantly in contact with me, I'm fine. I'll just try and text [message] you most days, but know that there's not going to be that much interesting". So I try [to] text [message] her about once a day, but I said to her, "don't text [message] me [everyday], every three days [at] most". It'd be nice to hear from her but I don't want her to [because of cost], so we don't often reply. It's not a conversation, but it is often; it's definitely wishing that I could say those things, oh like even voice would be better, than text [message], let alone face-to-face.

Adam and his girlfriend's regular use of the mobile phone to communicate could be partially explained by Dietmar's finding in her paper on the use of mobile communication in couple relationships. She argues that "the farther apart partners live from one another, the more important the reachability of the partner and the constant media-based contact with him/her is perceived" (Dietmar, 2005, p. 208).

Alison also understood that a phone call would be preferred but not always practical. She said she had used her mobile to connect with

> friends who, particular male friends who live a long way away, that it wasn't always practical to call him, so we would flirt via SMS instead, and catch up when I came up to Sydney.

In a different yet related way Logan felt that communicating with a mobile phone differed from other ways of communicating. Logan regularly worked in remote areas and thus was often physically distanced from friends. His family also lived apart in a different city. Not surprisingly, he reported that he used approximately AU$1,000 a month worth of calls and text messages. Here he described how he would call someone close to him who was physically far away, so that he could "sit down" in their "space". However, it is clear from his comments that Logan was not always comfortable in creating and maintaining an "absent presence".

> When I['ve] called someone and I've got really nothing to say. Got nothing to say, but I can't be with them because of destination, location whatever, time of night, time of day, but I really haven't called them for any reason . . . nothing at all . . . "Hi, how ya going", just that superficial shit. What at times really means nothing at all, which is more than any other time, and it's been a two second phone call, I felt uncomfortable 'cause I've rang for nothing, I have nothing to say, got nothing to offer you, I got to go now. You know what I mean, so [I] hang up because of that . . . yeah longing, loneliness and I'll sit down in your space.

In this response, Logan recounts that he feels the need to communicate with a friend or family member but that, due to the substantial distance between them (for employment reasons), he can only use the mobile phone to do so. Yet, when he does "reach out" via the mobile phone to connect, he realises that what he seeks is a connection and in fact he does not have a targeted purpose for the contact. In his description, it is clear that, once he realises he has generated an un-purposeful communication, he feels uncomfortable. Furthermore, it is not until he makes the call that this realisation occurs, meaning he continues to repeat the behaviour.

In *Mobile messages: Young people and a new communication culture* (2003), Kasesniemi suggests that this substitution goes even further. According to Kasesniemi (2003, p. 229):

the mobile phone is becoming a very central device that appears almost to be transcending its status as an object to become an instrument for something more important or even a "companion".

She argues that, in some instances, this intimate use of the mobile phone can be understood as a transition from being an "object of intimacy", to being a substitute for a friend.

Connections with family

One of the key groups of people that mobile phone owners use their phones to keep in contact with is their families. For example, this was illustrated recently in the *Sydney Morning Herald* when Horin observed that in the capital of Australia, Canberra, there were increasingly "poignant scenes around 7pm with fathers on mobile phones in Parliament House reading bedtime stories, and saying goodnight" (Horin, 2007, p. 37). The following explanations are typical of participants' reasons for the mobile phone becoming their main tool of communication with their closest family:

> I feel a warm and fuzzy feeling, if it's like family or something when they call rather than work (Amy).

> I would probably usually answer it for my family anytime, just 'cause they don't call for no reason (Richard).

Another participant highlighted this aspect of use when he was asked to describe how his life would be different without a mobile phone. The participant described the pragmatic concern of cheaper costs of phone calls via mobile phone in contrast to using a landline. He commented that the mobile phone was often his main tool for maintaining his connection with family and friends, and that it was important to him to have contact with, and to be contactable by, his family in this way because some of his family lived up to 4500kms away:

> Restricted. Really restricted. Just because . . . not all my family live in the same state. I've got family in Queensland and in Western Australia so it is actually cheaper for me to call from the mobile than it is to [call] from the land line, so I use that, and they know that they can use that [the mobile phone] to contact me as well (Martin).

For Amy, the mobile phone was also an important connection to her family. Her immediate family and family home is approximately 170km from her present place of abode. Nineteen-year-old Amy understood that the ownership and use of her mobile phone afforded her the freedom to live and study in a city other than her hometown. When asked what would happen if she chose not to own a mobile phone, Amy said:

> It would mean that I would have to be at home, at the time; Taree home, because Mum would not be able to cope with not ringing me for that long, like say it was a week or something . . . I would have to be around family 'cause they're very "checking-up-on" like, sort of very cautious.

Melinda also believed that her mobile phone was a good tool for keeping the *kind* of contact she wanted and for maintaining the type of relationship that she has with her father; she felt that it improved her relationships with her "friends, partner and family". She said the mobile phone was good to keep in contact with family because

> I don't really want to talk to family (laughs), but you don't want to totally cut them out either, I didn't mention that my dad does have a mobile phone, so yeah with my dad, that kind of placates him so that I can keep in contact without really keeping in contact, (laughs) so that

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way he knows that I'm still alive and I'm still his daughter, I'm okay, not in any sort of trouble. Yeah 'cause sometimes with my dad the conversation can be a bit, (pause) you know when you just, you run out of things to say, that happens with my dad.

At home, Alison had an array of ways to communicate with her loved ones, but it was her mobile phone that she mainly used to keep in contact. However, her expectation of whether the call would be "long" or "short" influenced her decision to use either the landline (shared with a flatmate and the internet) or her mobile phone. She said:

I have a landline, I use it occasionally if I'm making really long distance calls, or long distance calls that I think are going to be really long, we mainly use the landline for Internet so it's not tied up by, it's not dial up but it is just kinda something that we have there, cause we had to have it to get the Internet. Aside from that, both me and my flatmate have got mobiles, we use that to call friends and family . . . I am very close to my family and thankfully mum and dad both know how to use SMS (giggles), so it is a good way to keep in touch with them.

Rebecca too used her mobile phone to keep in contact with her family—both her mother and her 11-year-old daughter. Rebecca explained that she enjoys the discretion that the mobile phone affords her within the family environment for both herself and her daughter:

I remember we used to be in the middle of the whole family when we want[ed] to talk to somebody on the phone, and then we got long cords and [then] we got the cordless. But the mobile sort of like that you know without having to go through the rigmarole of explaining to your mum why you don't want to be talking in the middle of family . . . and my daughter, when she was going to my mum's house she could text message me if she got bored, without having to say to nanny, "I want to call mum because I'm bored". (Rebecca)

She also believes her mobile was like a "lifeline" to her daughter. Clearly, this communication relies on both Rebecca and her daughter each having and using a mobile phone.

It's sort of my lifeline to my daughter in a lot of ways too. I'm a very active person, I'm over here at Newcastle and I'm over at Maitland doing my prac and stuff and she's at Medowie . . . when she was in Sydney it gave her the option to discreetly let me know what was going on, if anything, if she was bored or whatever staying with Nanny for a week, without having to say "Nanny can I use the phone?", she could just text [message] me or whatever, and even when she goes to the playhouse, if she goes for sleep-outs and stuff like that, she takes it with her, unfortunately school won't let you take them on camps. (Rebecca)

Rebecca said that she used her mobile phone as a substitute for immediate face-to-face contact "during times of stress" and explained that, when "things aren't going right", she would use her mobile phone to connect, and have contact, with her mother.

Of course I wish she was there, but she's not there and it's an express thing isn't it? (Rebecca)

Conclusion

This paper has described the intimate mobile phone communication behaviours that individuals are practising, and it has illuminated the ways individuals perceive and understand their mobile phone communication practices. These practices are patterned in such a way that the majority of individuals recognise communication via a mobile phone to be a very meaningful way to maintain intimate relations. The analysis indicates that there is complexity in the layers of the discourse of mobile phone use, and it illuminates how different contexts may modify an individual's actions and reposition them accordingly. For example, for Adam, the text message was one of his and his

girlfriend's most intimate forms of contact whilst she was overseas; yet, when Adam needed to make contact with a person (who did not know him), using his mobile phone to make contact via a text message was not appropriate.

The paper has demonstrated that the majority of individuals in the study used their mobile phones as an intimate object, with the participants' uses of the technology in personal exchanges forming recognisable patterns. These instances of mobile communication have shared meanings because they are about making and maintaining connections, and identity and a sense of self are strongly linked with the connections an individual has with other people. This means that using a mobile phone to communicate has an effect on an individual's understanding of their role in personal and social discourses. Hence, individuals who have a strong desire to be in connection with their friends and family use the mobile phone to do so. The analysis revealed a range of ways the mobile phone is employed by participants to sustain contact with their family members. The mobile phone is used as a tool to create familiarity, closeness and understanding between friends and family, especially when they are not in close proximity. This was apparent through Rebecca's use of her mobile phone text messages to keep in contact with her daughter while her daughter was away at her grandparents, and in Martin's use of his mobile to remain in contact with his family who lived thousands of kilometres away. Indeed, the empirical data underscores Myerson's comments that the mobile phone has "become part of an idea of the family, of intimacy, emergency and work" (Myerson, 2001, p. 9).

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