Sakari Taipale*, *Intergenerational Connections in Digital Families*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019, 137 pp., $59.99 (paperback), $44.99 (ebook).

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Sakari Taipale focuses his book, *Intergenerational Connections in Digital Families*, on the changes that daily usage of digital technology has brought to the institution of the family. The thesis is based on data collected during 2014–2015 as part of his research project titled "Intergenerational Relations in Broadband Societies" that was carried out in the three represented countries (i.e., Finland, Italy, and Slovenia). Taipale focuses on extended families rather than on the individual level of digital-device usage, and he introduces the concept of a "digital family." His approach is certainly relevant. The introduction is promising. However, the account remains merely descriptive, and the mission of the book is unfulfilled.

In simple terms, "digital family" is the extended family within which members communicate via digital devices on a level that is more complex than simple one-to-one. Taipale describes the changes in the institution of the family over the past decades and the prevalence of digital technologies in the developed parts of the world. The three-chapter (2, 3, and 4) theoretical background is designed to convince the reader that digital families are uniquely and qualitatively new. Taipale makes the most promising claim in the third chapter, where he states that the adoption and actual usage of digital technologies, by both the youngest and oldest members, changes the stability in family roles and disrupts the power dynamic. However, the declared novelty of digital families remains the major argument to study the usage of digital technologies in intra-family communication, and Taipale fails when aiming to attract attention to a specific research problem. He does a substantial literature review, but it lacks a clear link to his work.

I find better support in chapter 4, where Taipele calls for a revision of the Mannheimian understanding of generations to make them more dynamic over different life periods. Unfortunately, he could make even more inferences. For example, he mentions some contradictory conclusions made by other researchers about family solidarity that rises or erodes because of digital technology usage and resolves this discrepancy with a trivial statement:

> Irrespective of whether there may be more or less solidarity than before binding the members of contemporary extended families together, however, what seems clear is that at least some degree of solidarity, as well as a certain level of conflicts and ambivalence, remains characteristic of intergenerational relationships in all kinds of families and at all times (pp. 45–46).

Taipale offers a wide theoretical background in the first part of his book. Although he is not wholly successful in consolidating all of his thoughts into one solid account, he promises a rich basis for the analytical part. Unfortunately, the analysis is rather undertheorized, and hence the effort devoted to the theoretical exposition goes unrewarded. For example, both the description of inequality between men and women concerning their digital skills and the criticisms of Mannheim's (1997) theory of generations are not echoed in the data work.

Moreover, while Taipale emphasizes diversity in the form of a contemporary family, he does not analyze the observations of families in this regard. In the book, there are mentions of stepparents and stepsiblings, but without any analytical sensitivity. Though Taipale states in the second chapter that it is important to distinguish between family and household, he himself does not follow this imperative in his analysis.

The undertheorizing could also be expressed with numbers: There are four literature sources in the fifth chapter, eight in the sixth chapter, and four in the eighth chapter. The only exception is the seventh chapter, which employs 43 sources and is based on the analysis of WhatsApp usage for intra-family communication. As Taipale argues, WhatsApp is—thanks to its features—an inclusive communication tool because it is cheap, easy to use, and suitable for different modes of communication. He also recognizes the importance of short messages sent via this platform as phatic expressions, which then strengthens the sense of togetherness. It is probably the most interesting part of his analysis. However, the key concepts of phatic communion (Malinowski, 1946) or phatic culture (Miller, 2008) are not covered in the theoretical part. Similarly, the concept of warm experts (Bakardjieva, 2005), central for the fifth chapter, appears in this part for the first time. It further diminishes the theoretical part of the book.

Unfortunately, Taipale even follows this practice in the conclusion. In this chapter, he interestingly argues that the use of digital devices could contribute to refamilization (i.e., the rebonding of loose family ties, which was supported by the rise and success of welfare states after World War II). In this era of prosperity, nations—especially in Northern Europe—promoted equal and rich social systems that were to enable the emancipation of marginalized groups, especially women. These politics, however, weakened the ties that were based on the mutual dependency and responsibility of family members. Now in the 21st century, the welfare state seems to hardly be sustainable in terms of the material support that it may provide to each individual. Therefore, actual policies tend to count on solidarity within families. According to Taipale, the use of digital technology among family members supports the solidarity among them. Such a conclusion goes against the prevailing notion that digital technology fosters the individualized character of society, not excepting families, and this is the most remarkable and valuable message of the book. The problem is that Taipale did not integrate the concepts of refamilization and defamilization into the preceding parts.

If he had done so, he could more thoroughly develop his account. Actually, he is not able to reveal any family role changes, which had been announced in the theoretical part and which were to have been boosted by digital technology use. The only exception is the unsurprising discovery that digital families need someone to take care of their devices and the younger members of the family mainly occupy

this role. In his account, the attribute of digitality stands for nothing but the very use of digital technology in families, but Taipale fails to cover any other qualitative change. This undesired consequence is the technodeterministic underpinning, even though the author apparently intended to avoid this reduction.

I could see the possible explanation for the prevailing descriptive character of the book in the data collection. Taipale and his colleagues invented a whole new method for the research project, which they called the Extended Group Interview. Taipale explains this concept in the appendix. He characterizes it as a collaborative ethnographic inquiry in which the main researcher and key informants work together. Key informants, in this case, were Taipale's students from three universities selected from three of the represented countries. They all were supposed to observe their relatives and interview at least five of them (including a minimum of one parent and one grandparent) for one week and deliver three reports of at least 300 words each. According to them, they covered used technologies in their extended families, assessed their relatives' ICT skills, and reported how ICT had shaped the role of members in their families. This means Taipale had no direct access to the interviews. Since he developed a whole new data-gathering approach, I would expect him to portray the method broadly. Also, there is no evident connection between the theoretical problem and the research method. The main benefit of the Extended Group Interview method, as explained by the author, was the apparent effectiveness of getting data. However, the advanced focus on specific kinds of data and its purposes is lacking.

The unfulfilled potential of the theoretical baseline merely allows Taipale to invite other researchers to inspect the influence of digital technology on families instead of him having delivered more valuable answers. This research provides a thread for further exploration. If he had elaborated on the process of defamilization in detail, he could have found that unstable and diverse forms of family are not necessarily new, and that would strip the concept of "digital family" of its most distinguishing quality.

References

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