

Sonia Livingstone

The meaning of domestic technologies: a personal construct analysis of familial gender relations

Book section

Original citation:

Livingstone, Sonia (1992) The meaning of domestic technologies: a personal construct analysis of familial gender relations. In: Hirsch, Eric and Silverstone, Roger, (eds.) Consuming technologies: media and information in domestic spaces. Routledge, London, UK. ISBN 9780415069908

© 1992 Routledge

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/61632/>

Available in LSE Research Online: April 2015

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's submitted version of the book section. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Originally published as:

Livingstone, S. (1992) The meaning of domestic technologies: a personal construct analysis of familial gender relations. In R. Silverstone and E. Hirsch (Eds.), *Consuming Technologies*. London: Routledge.

Chapter 7**The meaning of domestic technologies
A personal construct analysis of familial gender relations¹**

Sonia M. Livingstone

The family, gender and domestic technologies

Home ownership and state suburbanization have opened up a new lifestyle based on family possession of consumer durables. (McDowell 1983: 157)

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which families account for their use of domestic technologies. The family may be characterized in terms of dynamic properties emergent from the interaction between members. Family dynamics are expressed and managed through shared goals, family myths, rules and routines, conflicts and tensions, and its frameworks for explanation and understanding (Byng-Hall 1978; Reiss 1981; Olson *et al.* 1983). These properties affect the ways in which families variously construe the relationships between individual members of the family and between the family and the social world.

The accounting practices through which people understand and explain the role of domestic technologies in their lives reflect their gender relations and family dynamics. Talk about the television or the telephone, for example, is imbued with notions of who lets who use what, of moral judgements of the other's activities, of the expression of needs and desires, of justifications and conflict, of separateness and mutuality. The purpose of analysing such talk is that 'while from a *theoretical* point of view, human acts encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context' (Appadurai 1986: 5). Domestic practices are not only revealing, they are also constitutive: 'consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape' (Douglas and Isherwood 1978: 57).

Symbolic meanings and everyday objects

It is clear that between what a man calls *me* and what he simply calls *mine*, the line is difficult to draw. (James 1890: 291)

Relatively few empirical studies have explored people's everyday experiences of consumption. Psychologists generally focus on interactions between people, not recognizing that social life takes place in a material context with which people also conduct meaningful interactions. Yet people are 'no longer surrounded by other human beings, as they have been in the past, but by *objects*' (Baudrillard 1988: 29). Davidson (1982) notes how these objects are changing ever faster,

exacerbating the task of making sense of them. How do material objects come to acquire social meanings and how are they incorporated into everyday experiences?

When discussing the significance of 'home', Putnam describes 'an interweaving of personal imagination, lived relationships and shaped surroundings' (1990: 7). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) studied exactly this in their ethnographic study of 'the meaning of things' to eighty-two Chicago families. They identified a range of uses of domestic objects: symbols which mediate conflicts within the self (see also Turkle 1984), signs which express qualities of the self, signs which mediate between self and others, and signs of social status. For Prentice (1987), these represent symbolic functions of possessions, which he distinguishes from the instrumental functions identified, for example, in a study of the meaning of personal possessions in old age (Kamptner 1989). Kamptner emphasized the importance of objects in exercising personal control over the social environment (see also Furby 1978).

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) identify two modalities for the symbolic functions which organize the relation between people and things: differentiation, 'separating the owner from the social context, emphasizing his or her individuality' (ibid.: 38); and similarity, where 'the object symbolically expresses the integration of the owner with his or her social context' (ibid.: 39). While the dynamic between these two forces is fundamental to a sense of self, their study of possessions led Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton to claim that the balance differed between people. Most notably, men and younger people expressed a more differentiated sense of self in relation to possessions while women and older people tended more towards similarity or other-orientation. Dittmar (1989) also showed how for men the meaning of possessions was more self-oriented and instrumental, while for women possessions were used to express more symbolic, other-oriented functions.

How people make sense of their domestic circumstances has implications for their experiences of frustration or satisfaction, of potency or passivity, of individuality or connectedness, and it underpins their desire to maintain the status quo or to negotiate change. Putnam argues that 'an understanding of home becomes a means for organising the world and orienting our passage through it' (1990: 7). More broadly still, Kelly, the originator of personal construct theory, claims that 'much of [a person's] social life is controlled by the comparisons he has come to see between himself and others' (1963: 131).

Douglas and Isherwood discuss processes of 'cognitive construction' (1978: 65) in consumption, resulting in what Miller has termed 'consumption work' – 'that which translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable condition' (ibid.: 190). This work of appropriation includes 'the more general construction of cultural milieu which gives such objects their social meaning' (ibid.: 191). By making sense of consumer durables in their lives people also realize the 'essential function of consumption [which] is its capacity to make sense' (ibid.: 62). How does making sense of domestic technologies contribute to the construction of gender relations in the family?

A personal construct approach

Various theoretical approaches might illuminate the ways families account for their domestic practices. From family therapy, a focus on family myths would reveal the shared belief system which sets out members' roles, responsibilities, and scripts for action (Byng-Hall 1978). From social psychology, a study of people's attitudes towards new technology (Breakwell and Fife-Shaw 1987) or social representations (Moscovici 1984) of technology or patterns of attribution and explanation (Antaki 1988) in the family might predict family interaction around domestic technologies.

The present research adopted Kelly's (1955) personal construct approach, for this offered a theory and method which allowed exploration of the different perspectives of different family members and which meshes with the ethnographic concerns of the larger project of which this research is part (Silverstone *et al.* 1989). A personal construct analysis asks about the nature of people's constructions of domestic technologies. One may also ask about the relation between the construct systems of husband and wife and the relation between the private, personal and the public, shared construct systems. Putnam notes that 'research into the meaning of home repeatedly throws up the same basic terms; privacy, security, family, intimacy, comfort, control' (Putnam 1990: 8). Key questions remain: How are these terms related to different objects? What significance do they have for those who use them? How are they differently used by family members? How do they fit into diverse construct systems?

Personal construct theory (Kelly 1955; 1963; Bannister and Fransella 1971) focuses on the ways in which people actively construct their phenomenological world. It argues that people only know the world through systems of constructs which serve to categorize and connect events. The notion of the construct is central: 'each personal construct is based upon the simultaneous perception of likeness and difference among the objects of its context' (Kelly 1955: 560). Meaning is generated through contrastive judgements of similarity and difference. Psychological functioning is determined by the ways in which a person applies constructs. For example: Over what range of elements is a construct typically applied? To what is a construct implicitly or explicitly opposed? How do one person's constructs relate to another's? How complex or rigid or permeable is someone's construct system?

Through their construct systems, people may be understood to be striving to impose order and certainty on a fragmented and constantly changing world. Broadly speaking, personal construct theory studies what Bourdieu terms the 'practical mastery of classification' (1984: 472), where classification can be understood in terms of spatial relations such as opposition, difference, similarity, spread, and so forth. This practical mastery implies nothing about reflexivity or principled understanding of the classification, but rather concerns 'the sense of social realities that is ... what makes it possible to act *as if* one knew the structure of the social world, one's place within it and the distances that need to be kept' (*ibid.*: 472).

The research methodology

The personal construct research described here forms part of a larger, multi-method project on family use of domestic technologies (Silverstone *et al.* 1989; see also chapters 1 and 13, this volume). The larger project investigated a broad

range of questions concerning household uses of domestic technologies. The families in the study were selected so as to vary on dimensions of social class, occupation, location and religion, but to be roughly comparable in composition, age and possession of consumer durables. Sixteen families were studied in depth, using a range of methodologies including diaries, maps of domestic space, ethnographic observation, and interviews about viewing habits (Silverstone *et al.* 1989). The personal construct interviews were designed to complement the other methods used, offering an individual and phenomenological analysis of the ways in which husbands and wives separately experienced and accounted for their domestic technologies. I conducted separate in-depth interviews with the husband and wife in each of the sixteen families (all names have been changed). Each interview lasted some 45 minutes, each was taped, and each took place in relative privacy in the family home.

The interviews were based on the 'personal construct interview' designed by Kelly (1955; see Fransella and Bannister 1977). This elicits key constructs (descriptive words or phrases) through which people frame their understanding of, in this case, domestic technologies. Husbands and wives were separately asked to identify the similarities and differences between a set of objects (persons, technologies, etc.). Respondents sorted the technologies into similar categories and explained the basis of their grouping. Second, they compared arbitrary groups of three technologies to 'find the odd one out' (the 'triadic method'), again explaining the reasons for their choice. This comparison task was conducted flexibly so that interesting or unclear distinctions could be pursued. The interview was opened with the general injunction to think about moods, feelings and associations rather than about the uses of technologies. (How do you feel when you use X? What makes you prefer relaxing with X to Y? What does Z mean to you?). Although some participants were initially surprised by the task, they found it reasonably accessible.

This chapter offers an interpretative rather than a statistical analysis of the personal construct interviews (Adams-Webber 1989), focusing on the personal constructs of husbands and wives as revealed through their accounts of their use of domestic technologies and analysing these in terms of the categories of gender and family dynamics. Clearly, additional themes also emerged from the interviews, different analytic categories could be applied to the data, and further links could be made with other methods used across the larger research project than can be discussed here (see chapter 13).

Gendered talk about technologies

In so far as objects function as extensions of the self, invested with personal and family meanings, the language with which people discuss their technologies tells us of their identities, their needs and desires, their ways of interpreting the world and of relating to each other (Lunt and Livingstone, in press). While in many ways women and men shared a discourse for describing their possessions, there were also important differences. Although most domestic technologies are used by both husband and wife, they must be used differently and hence they are often understood differently. For example, both watch television but may also do so at different times of day and for different programmes; both use the telephone, but often for quite different types of calls; both listen to the radio, but

to accompany different activities. The differences in accounting for and understanding of these technologies may be broadly characterized in terms of four key constructs: necessity, control, functionality, sociality.

Necessity

Compared with men, the women talked more explicitly about the importance of domestic technologies in their lives. Common constructs included 'lifeline', 'would miss it', 'important', 'use a lot', and 'essential', and these were opposed to such constructs as 'luxury', 'could manage without it', and 'rarely use'. Women described how technologies helped them – with their chores, with childcare. They described the convenience provided by technologies with relief, shuddering at their vision of domestic life without them:

'Lifesaving, dear, lifesaving, particularly that [washing machine] comes first, followed by that [tumble drier], followed by the telephone. Stereo record player comes next. Without them I couldn't survive. They are my lifelines.' (Shirley Lyon)

'I couldn't live without it [washing machine].... I couldn't live without that either [freezer] ... washing machine – I've got no option. It's got to be used whether I like it or not.' (Lynn Irving)

'The only way I can get through what I have to do.' (Christine Dole)

As is generally the case (Oakley 1974; Henwood *et al.* 1987), the woman was mainly responsible for housework in all of the families studied. Women's particular emphasis on the necessity of white goods reflects the relative lack of distinction for women between work and home (as Morley (1986) and others have argued, for men the home is primarily the site of leisure). If work-related objects are construed as necessary and entertainment objects are more often seen as luxuries, then for women the home is seen more in terms of necessity, and threats to the home (frequently imagined through the question 'Could I live without it?') place them in more jeopardy. The additional objects construed in terms of necessity can be understood as compensating for the frustrations of housework – the telephone to combat isolation, the stereo as an essential source of pleasure, a cassette player to return to one's sense of self. These are necessary because, as Oakley (1974: 223) argues, 'the housewife cannot get any information about herself from the work she does'.

Control

It seemed at first as if women were more concerned about control in relation to technologies:

'I like the video because it gives you control over when you watch things.'
(Gloria de Guy)

'The telephone I hate.... Once I'm actually on the phone I don't mind it so much, it's the fact that it rings and interrupts you ... you don't have control over it.' (Sarah Green)

Women talked more often of being 'in control of it' or 'it gives you control over things'. On the other hand, the construct of control, used in a different sense, was important for men. They valued the challenge posed by domestic technologies (especially home computer, electric drill) and talked in terms of the potential rewards offered ('challenging', 'stimulating', 'gives a choice', 'achievement'):

'[I use the computer] when I want to be a bit more active than just sitting down and watching, but actually want to do something a bit more ... stimulating.' (Daniel Dole)

'I genuinely enjoy ironing.... It's peaceful, it's a feeling of you're actually achieving something.' (Paul de Guy)

Clearly, 'control' can mean different things to different people. For women, control refers more to keeping potential domestic chaos at bay, keeping things under control, having control over things. For men it means allowing the expression of expertise, permitting the exercise of control or power. This difference is also seen in the frequent use of the construct of functionality.

Functionality

Men tended to emphasize that technologies are 'purely functional'. By their frequent use of constructs such as 'functional', 'utilitarian', 'a tool', they focus their attention less on the role of the object in their lives and more on the inherent properties of the object. Commonly, technologies are described in terms of their technical features. For example, many men differentiated between audio and visual media, or they emphasized what connects with what, or what properties an object has, or how modern the technology is:

'You get more out of them [television and video], of course, you get sound and vision as well, it's more real as well.... I do think of it in compartments like that [audio versus visual].' (Mark Lyon)

'I mean quite often the television's on and I'm not taking any notice of it, in fact it's quite often on and nobody's watching it, the reason being it's not good for the television to keep switching it on and off I mean that's a technical thing.' (Frank Irving)

'That's functional [the telephone].... For example, I ring my brother if I want to ask if I can borrow his sledgehammer.... I don't really want to know what he did yesterday and I don't tell him what I did yesterday.... As I say, it's purely functional.' (Paul de Guy)

However, women are also concerned with the utility of objects, often assessing their 'convenience' or whether they 'make things easier'. Their concern is how

the object allows them to function in their everyday lives. They thereby acknowledge the contextual meaning and value of objects for them: they tend to refer outwards to domestic practices when justifying object use rather than pointing out its inherent properties, its modern features or its price tag.

This pattern of accounting may provide men with a sense of inevitability, of consensual support for their consumer choices and values, while women may have to work harder to justify why their particular circumstances warrant a new purchase. One possible consequence is that men may more easily disguise, or not recognize, psychological reasons for product use. For example, one may claim to prefer television to radio because the provision of both audio and visual channels is obviously more relaxing, while another may feel the absence of a visual channel makes his stereo more relaxing. Yet maybe the former also finds television relaxing because it dominates the living room, ensuring that his needs are prioritized, while the latter finds music on the headphones relaxing because he is thereby cut off from the demands of his children.

The women interviewed seemed more aware that their choices of possessions and their talk about these possessions were revealing. For men, meanings seemed to lie within the object, not within their lives, and were thus presented as obvious and natural. Maybe these gender differences reflect more general differences in the accounting practices of those who have more or less power. After all, 'inequality in the wider society meshes with inequality within the household' (Pahl 1989: 170).

It was also apparent that both men and women tend to employ a passivized discourse for technology use which tends to delete them as the agent, reflecting a perceived lack of control (Trew 1979). Decisions, preferences and meanings were frequently reified and attributed to the technologies rather than construed as a reflection of themselves or their situation. Televisions just 'go on', for adults rarely confess to switching them on, radios 'come on' in the morning automatically, washing machines 'have to' be used, stereos have become too cumbersome to use:

'Television might go on usually when [his son] comes in.... It doesn't get turned off necessarily.' (Keith Mitchell)

'It's so fiddly nowadays to use a record.... In this day and age records are a drag to put on and put a stylus on, then clean them.' (Frank Irving)

'The television tends to be on.' (Mark Lyon)

Sociality/privacy

Domestic technologies appear to play at least two distinct roles in social interaction: they may facilitate interaction between people, and they may substitute for that interaction, providing instead a social interaction between person and object. In general, men talked more of technologies providing a substitute for social contact (using constructs such as 'keeps me company', 'stops me feeling lonely') or an alternative to social contact ('when I'm by myself'). For them, the key technologies which carry these social meanings are the radio, Walkman and television.

'While I work in the living room I usually have the television without any sound ... the television in the background when I'm doing other things ... relieving tension.' (Gerald Green)

In contrast, for women technologies were often seen to facilitate social contact ('sociable', 'lifeline'). Consequently the key technologies were the telephone and the car. For women, the telephone was a vital source of emotional involvement, a connection with friends and family. They generally discussed the telephone with enthusiasm and pleasure. Even the microwave and dishwasher could be included under this construct of sociality, by creating spare time for socializing:

'It's [telephone] a connection to other people, other worlds, prevents me from being isolated. And if you can't get to see people, you can chat to them. So I enjoy the fact that it's there, to be in contact with people.' (Lynn Irving)

As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) argued, the uses of objects to differentiate oneself from others and to connect oneself to others both confer selfhood, but they result in a different psychological balance between individuality and communality. This is clearly seen in women's enthusiasm for the telephone, when they feel real, alive:

'Talking on the telephone is really being, just myself, you know, to listen to who is on the telephone.' (Linda Bell)

'I love that. I love talking on the telephone. I enjoy a chat on the telephone.... I'd phone all over the world if it wasn't so expensive. I'd be busy all the time.' (Lynn Irving)

This contrasts strongly with men's frequently expressed hostility towards or lack of interest in the telephone, often construed in terms of functionality (where properties inherent to the telephone make it an unattractive device):

'The telephone is used – well, the telephone is just a random gadget – it's either used or it's not used. It's either used because there's a need to use it or it's used because somebody else is using it and we have to be at the receiving end.... I don't much use the telephone unless I have absolutely to use it.... She's the dominant user of the phone. And probably accounts for about 75 per cent of the cost of use. So that's not really an area I'm terribly into – it's absolutely totally utilitarian for me. It's only used because there's a need to use it.' (Frank Irving)

For men, calls are 'just functional', to make arrangements, or they represent the interruption of work into the domestic space. Consequently, men regard the telephone with irritation, suspicion and boredom, they see little point in chatting on the phone, avoid initiating a call, and often prefer not to answer an incoming call.

Presumably, through this relation between constructs and technologies, men are not here rejecting communal or shared aspects of self. Instead, it seems

likely that they balance the dynamic between differentiation and similarity through the use of different social situations, most notably work, and different technologies. Moyal (1990) shows how the telephone is more important for women who depend on a, typically female, social support network. Moreover, the telephone is needed by women for their social role of kin-keeper for the family, a function not always understood by husbands (revealing how different construct systems may lead to misunderstanding or tension):

'She may use it [the telephone] because she wants to talk to a friend – there's no need to talk to her friend, but she will use it to talk to her friend. Whereas for me it is not a tool of entertainment, it's just simply used because I need to use it.' (Frank Irving)

'However, my wife can spend about five or six hours on the telephone.... I find it quite irritating the way some people go on and on.' (Paul de Guy)

Different experiences and roles within the home result in differing construct systems. These in turn may result in misunderstandings over, for example, what is or is not necessary:

'I would like to get one [washing machine] but my husband said it's not really necessary ... [use the launderette?] They just ruin them [clothes], it crumples them, too difficult to iron and some of them you won't be able to use again ... so I prefer to wash it by hand.' (Linda Bell)

Public and private meanings of things

In the world of marketing and advertising, of public discourse, of social representations (Moscovici 1984), it could be argued that a masculine discourse is predominant (e.g. Gilligan 1982). Public meanings of things often concur with the ways in which men account for or understand them. For example, the television is publicly defined as an 'entertainment medium', and men construe it similarly as 'relaxing', 'interesting', 'enjoyable'. There is little public acknowledgement that, for many women, television is of little interest ('It doesn't bother me'), except for particular genres (most notably soaps, which offer experiences of sociality or communality (Livingstone 1988)):

'I hardly ever use it [video].... It doesn't bother me. Neither does the television. I'm not terribly fussed ... two or three programmes a week I especially watch.' (Shirley Lyon)

Women's relative lack of expressed interest may be masked by the ratings figures, for they have it on for long hours to babysit the children, or because the children forget to turn it off, or to hear when their favourite programme comes on when they are in the kitchen. As Morley (1986) suggests, television is problematic for women because it demands inactivity in a space construed as both work and leisure. In this study, women often talked of the radio or cassette player with greater enthusiasm, yet in public discourse these are less valued objects, being cheaper, older, technologically less interesting. Similarly, the

telephone is publicly seen through men's constructs – as functional, providing a service, there for emergencies, a gadget with fancy dials and extra functions. British Telecom's Beattie ridicules the woman who chats on the phone, while the men are resigned, distant (although some recent advertising is more clearly targeted towards women, for whom social contacts are 'only a phone call away').

These public representations enter the private relations between men and women in various ways (see Morley 1986). When the construct systems of husband and wife differ significantly, the relative power of these public representations may preclude recognition of the woman's needs or desires, making the negotiation of product purchase especially difficult for women:

'We [self and husband] basically don't like the same programmes. And he also goes out to work at night so I will choose my own programme.... He has first choice normally.... He won't watch in the bedroom ... but in the lounge I can see it properly – in our bedroom it's awful [green screen].'
(Lynn Irving)

Yet when asked if they might replace the bedroom television with the defective screen, he says:

'No, no, no, there's not any need for it. We just don't have to watch the television.' (Frank Irving)

Constructs also direct perception and attention. Thus the woman's activities may often go unrecognized, while the man's activities are made public for him:

'[he] is not household-oriented, he doesn't realize what needs to be done.'
(Shirley Lyon)

Women often organize their time to support this: in the Simon family, the woman gets up at 6 a.m. to do all the washing and ironing before the family rises, rendering the housework as invisible for her husband as it is in the public mind (Oakley 1974). Similarly, men may claim that 'we' rarely use the radio, when in fact she has it on all day while doing the housework, only turning it off when he returns in the evening to watch television.

Public representations may also provide external legitimation for the husband's desires, allowing him to override her account of their needs:

'I'd like a compact disc player but that's a bone of contention ... well, she thinks of it as being a bit of a luxury, but eventually, when I'm ready to buy one I will get one and that will be the end of the matter. So I will get one.'
(Frank Irving)

They may further be used to justify his exercise of power within the home, circumventing her activities or wishes:

'I would like to use it [electric drill] but my husband won't allow me.... He won't allow me to use that, he did it for me, if I ask him if I could do it when he's out or at work he says, "Oh don't touch them or whatever, I can do it

for you” He said only a man could do that, but mind you if he’s not around I know that I could use it.’ (Linda Bell)

Generally, the present findings concur with Pahl when, after interviews with husbands and wives separately, the wives claimed that, ‘in general, husbands were likely to perceive a greater degree of sharing [of economic resources] in marriage than wives, who were more aware of conflicts of opinion and interest’ (Pahl 1989: 169). At times, neither husband nor wife may perceive conflict, for both share the public construction of domestic activities. For example, both men and women talk of white goods (used almost exclusively by women) as ‘time savers’ which ‘make life easier’ (for her). Yet this need not imply that the interests of both men and women are served. The shared, public representation may render beyond question the issue of whether or not, for example, ‘clothes must be changed every day’, and ‘cannot wait’ (Lynn Irving). However, as many have noted (Oakley 1974; Davidson 1982; Cowan 1989), ‘labour-saving devices’ often increase labour and leisure time is lost, as women do so much ‘necessary’ washing, or use the ‘convenient’ microwave to cook for each member of the family separately as they come home.

Do different construct systems result in conflict? Interestingly, neither men nor women talk of objects they use little: men are silent about the sewing machine, and often about the washing machine; women have nothing to say about the drill or, often, the hi-fi. The use of different constructs for the same technology – for example, women construe the telephone as involving and the television as uninteresting while for men the converse is often true – may or may not generate conflict. Conflict is sometimes expressed over future purchases, where couples compete for resources. Indeed, technology acquisition is often seen as the resolution to acknowledged family problems. In the Lyon family, the wife is longing for her own cassette player so as to retreat to her bedroom and escape the family chaos, to regain her own peace and sense of individuality. In the Dole family, both husband and wife wish for a video camera to record their children, particularly as one child may not survive long: their desired technology expresses their desire for family cohesion under threat.

Family dynamics: cohesion and separation

While clear gender differences in accounting for use of domestic technologies were apparent across the sample of families studied, the inconsistencies or contradictions within the pattern were not insignificant. To understand these, we must recognize that the gender relations studied were constructed and expressed in the context of family dynamics, and that these dynamics will, for psychological, social and historical reasons, vary between families. In particular, cohesion and dispersal, with their more extreme forms – enmeshing and disengagement – represent a key family dynamic (Reiss 1981; Olson *et al.* 1983) around which the complex relationship between gender and domestic technologies, among other things, is played out in everyday life. This interpersonal dynamic parallels the intrapsychic dynamic between similarity and differentiation in the construction of the self in relation to others (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Such complexities and contradictions in gender relations in constructions of domestic technologies may

be illuminated by considering the dynamics of the family, focusing here on the degree of cohesion or separation between the husband and wife.

For example, the Dole family differs from the general picture in that the wife tends not to construe the telephone in terms of a lifeline or connection to others. Nor does she distance herself from the television. Similarly, he feels little antipathy towards the telephone, and shares her interests in the television. They talk of each technology in similar rather than contrasting ways, talking of 'we', rather than 'I'. Their shared pattern of accounting for object use reflects their shared, cohesive family dynamics, which in turn derive from the 'real work' they do together at home fostering children. The telephone plays a special role for them in connection with the fostering work, so maybe the 'functionality' of the telephone overrides the alternative construction of 'sociality'. Maybe, too, the closeness of their interests and roles overcomes the loneliness and frustrations which might otherwise colour her position as housewife.

'Normally we'd either be all in the front room, together as a family, at the end of the day, the one time when certainly the two older ones would be with Mum and Dad, tidying up the loose ends as to what had happened at school and what was going to happen tomorrow.... On the telly we'd be more likely to watch a documentary-type factual piece of information ... particularly if about children, the social side of things, which for the last eight years as foster parents we have obviously been very involved in. So all that sort of thing is of great interest to both of us, great interest, it's no hard work listening to at all.... She goes for the soaps more, that's not to say I'll walk out of the room when *Coronation Street* is on. If they're on, and I'm in the room, then I'm just as likely to sit down and see what's going on.'
(Daniel Dole; she confirms this view)

'I don't actually use it [telephone] to chat on but I use it to arrange things on. You know, if I want to talk to somebody, I'll phone them up and ask when we can get together.' (Christine Dole)

In contrast, the Lyon family lives, as she describes, 'like ships in the night'. Their views of their technologies are quite different, they talk of 'I', not 'we', and they disagree in their priorities for product purchase, having very different construct systems – he thinks television is 'more real'; she wants a cassette player 'to keep me sane'. Their separation, however, is due in part to the fact that both work outside the home, and they rarely see each other. Consequently, she too differs from the general picture, for example, not liking to chat on the telephone, although she does value it as a lifeline when he works away from home. In this case, her pleasures and attention are, with the exception of her children, focused away from the home, for her work provides an alternative reality in which she is noticed, valued, and in satisfying social contact with others.

A final example concerns a traditional, role-segregated couple (the de Guy family). She appears to have positively embraced the housewife role. As with the examples above, she too lacks enthusiasm for leisure activities, using rather neutral constructs about the telephone and television, for example. She comes alive talking about housework:

'I fight against things which take away from all aspects of housework. I actually like cooking, I like washing up, I enjoy it.... I'd rather just do as I go along ... hygienic.' (Gloria de Guy)

She also appears to exercise the traditional notion of indirect female power (Williams and Watson 1988), being very concerned to control the domestic space. For example, she threw out their previous stereo system because it 'was not compatible with the room'; as her husband notes, 'she loves the grass to be this high – 2 cm high'. She chooses what they will buy, and even though she knows that his hi-fi was 'his main love before we married', she says:

'[he wants compact disc] I shall try to dissuade him, I can't see the point.... He would love to have the more advanced product, but I don't think it's so important, and he tends to like to keep me happy, so we're not getting it for now.' (Gloria de Guy)

Although they talk in terms of 'we', their constructs are quite different and they disagree about many things (he likes constant background noise, she prefers patches of music; he bought a computer for the children, she disapproves of 'learning through play'). Again, her focus of key constructs on white goods particularly, neglecting brown or entertainment goods, can be understood in the context of their family dynamics.

Family dynamics and the role of domestic technologies

The changing and expanding market for domestic technologies may influence the options families face when negotiating their relationships and domestic practices. Twenty or thirty years ago, when bedrooms were more commonly left unheated, families owned only one television set, and videos were unheard of, one can see that the main living room had considerable symbolic importance as the locus of family life (Morley 1986; Putnam 1990). Today, domestic space and the range of domestic objects have changed dramatically (McDowell 1983; Forty 1986; Madigan and Munro 1990): many families heat all their rooms, bedrooms may be used in the day, families have multiple televisions, even multiple videos and telephones, and numerous radios and cassette players – typically more radios than people. If television once brought the family together around the hearth, now domestic technologies permit the dispersal of family members to different rooms or different activities within the same space.

In our study, some families did not have the option of multiple technologies or multiple rooms. The Bell family is relatively poor, and tends to draw together around the television in the living room. The Mitchell family is also poor, but often chooses to switch off the one set in their one warm room in order together to support their son in his work or play. In contrast, all six members of one family in the pilot study (Silverstone *et al.* 1989) watched *Neighbours* every day, but each on separate sets or at different times, and they did not see this common experience as an occasion for conversation or sharing. The White family provides music centres and televisions for each child in his or her bedroom and construes this positively in terms of encouraging independence and individuality.

Families differ in the balance struck between cohesion and dispersal. Domestic space, leisure time, financial resources, and ownership of technologies all combine to permit different arrangements of family life (Lunt and Livingstone, in press). Further research should ask whether technologies are used to facilitate family cohesion and unity or family dispersal and diversity, how families negotiate their choices and what implications their understandings and decisions have for family life, technology use and gender relations.

Note

- 1 An earlier version of this chapter was presented at an ESRC/PICT workshop, 'Domestic consumption and information and communication technologies', 18–19 May 1990, CRICT, Brunel University, and at the annual conference of the International Communication Association, June 1990, Dublin. Thanks to Peter Lunt for comments on an earlier version.

References

- Adams-Webber, J.R. (1989) 'Some reflections of the "meaning" of repertory grid responses', *International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology* 2: 77–92.
- Antaki, C. (ed.) (1988) *The Analysis of Everyday Explanations*, London: Sage.
- Appadurai, A. (1986) 'Commodities and the politics of value', in A. Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3–63.
- Bannister, D. and Fransella, F. (1971) *Inquiring Man*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Baudrillard, J. (1988) 'Consumer society', in M. Poster (ed.) *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 29–56.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Breakwell, G.M. and Fife-Shaw, C. (1987) 'Young people's attitudes towards new technology: source and structure', in J.H. Lewko (ed.) *How Children and Adolescents View the World of Work*, New Directions for Child Development, no. 35, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 51–67.
- Byng-Hall, J. (1978) 'Family myths used as defence in conjoint family therapy', *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 40: 239–50.
- Cowan, R.S. (1989) *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, London: Free Association Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. and Rochberg-Halton, E. (1981) *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, C. (1982) *A Woman's Work is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles 1650–1950*, London: Chatto & Windus.
- Dittmar, H. (1989) 'Gender identity-related meanings of personal possessions', *British Journal of Social Psychology* 28: 159–71.
- Douglas, M. and Isherwood, B. (1978) *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Forty, A. (1986) *Objects of Desire: Design and Society, 1750–1980*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Fransella, F. and Bannister, D. (1977) *A Manual for Repertory Grid Technique*, London: Academic Press.

- Furby, L. (1978) 'Possessions: towards a theory of their meaning and function throughout the life cycle', in P.B. Baltes (ed.) *Life-span Development and Behavior*, New York: Academic Press, 297–336.
- Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Henwood, M., Rimmer, L. and Wicks, M. (1987) *Inside the Family: The Changing Roles of Men and Women*, London: Family Policy Studies Centre, occasional paper no. 6.
- James, W. (1890) *Principles of Psychology*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Kamptner, N.L. (1989) 'Personal possessions and their meanings in old age', in S. Spacapan and S. Oskmap (eds) *The Social Psychology of Aging*, London: Sage, 165–96.
- Kelly, G.A. (1955) *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, vol. 2, New York: Norton.
- (1963) *A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, New York: Norton.
- Livingstone, S.M. (1988) 'Why people watch soap opera: an analysis of the explanations of British viewers', *European Journal of Communication* 3: 55–80.
- Lunt, P.K. and Livingstone, S.M. (in press) *Mass Consumption and Personal Identity*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- McDowell, L. (1983) 'Urban housing and the sexual division of labour', in M. Evans and C. Ungerson (eds) *Sexual Divisions: Patterns and Processes*, London: Tavistock, 142–63.
- Madigan, R. and Munro, M. (1990) 'Ideal homes: gender and domestic architecture', in T. Putnam and C. Newton (eds) *Household Choices*, London: Futures, 25–30.
- Miller, D. (1987) *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Morley, D. (1986) *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, London: Comedia.
- Moscovici, S. (1984) 'The phenomenon of social representations', in R.M. Farr and S. Moscovici (eds) *Social Representations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3–70.
- Moyal, A. (1990) 'Women and the telephone in Australia: study of a national culture', paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Communications Association, Dublin, June.
- Oakley, A. (1974) *Housewife*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Olson, D.H., McCubbin, H.I., Barnes, H.L., Larsen, A.S., Muxen, M.J. and Wilson, M.A. (1983) *Families: What Makes them Work*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Pahl, J. (1989) *Money and Marriage*, London: Macmillan.
- Prentice, D.A. (1987) 'Psychological correspondence of possessions, attitudes and values', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53: 993–1003.
- Putnam, T. (1990) 'Introduction: design, consumption and domestic ideals', in T. Putnam and C. Newton (eds) *Household Choices*, London: Futures, 7–19.
- Reiss, D. (1981) *The Family's Construction of Reality*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Silverstone, R., Morley, D., Dahlberg, A. and Livingstone, S.M. (1989) 'Families, technologies and consumption: the household and information and communication technologies', CRICT Discussion Paper.

- Trew, T. (1979) 'What the papers say: linguistic variation and ideological difference', in R. Fowler, B. Hodge, G. Kress and T. Trew (eds) *Language and Control*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 117–56.
- Turkle, S. (1984) *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Williams, J. and Watson, G. (1988) 'Sexual inequality, family life and family therapy', in E. Street and W. Dryden (eds) *Family Therapy in Britain*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 291–311.