# Virtual *ie*: A three-generational household mediated by webcam interactions

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## Abstract

This paper investigates how the use of a webcam creates an opportunity for dispersed Japanese families to construct a ''virtual *ie* ('stem-family system').'' The *ie* is a culturally specific model of stem families traditionally realized in the multigenerational household. My analyses of videotaped webcam interactions, ethnographic observations and interviews show that the use of a webcam does not simply allow a visuo-spatial convergence of two distinctive households, but it offers another context in which various social roles within an *ie* structure are negotiated. From this perspective, the emergence of virtual *ie* is an interactional achievement. Following approaches from Emancipatory Pragmatics, which encourage using local terms to describe participants' perspectives, I argue that participants in the virtual *ie* strategically use ''communicative affordances'' (Hutchby, 2001) of a webcam for representing the degree of ''in-groupness'' or *uchi*. Even though an *ie* is inherently an in-group, members within it constantly manage and negotiate their boundaries of in-groupness through interactions as they position themselves in relation to other members of the family. The limited visual access of a webcam is an opportunity to negotiate the degree of such ''in-groupness.''
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## 1. Introduction

As the use of digital communication technologies becomes a common part of our everyday lives, the relationship between technologies and various forms of interaction emerges as a rich site to expand the scope of studying our ordinary interactions. This paper focuses on using webcams in a home setting as one example of technologically mediated, ordinary interactions. Specifically I analyze intergenerational webcam interactions among Japanese families who live in geographically distant places such as Japan and the United States and discuss how children, parents, and grandparents become familiar with each other's presence across spaces.

Regardless of growing interest in understanding the role of technology in talk, mediated interactions have received insufficient attention in ethnographically oriented interaction studies. One reason for this may be that computer-mediated interaction is often considered disconnected from the classic communication context of face-to-face interaction. The presence of the ''unimagined user'' (Burrell and Anderson, 2008) creates difficulty in conducting classic ethnographic research that typically involves people in physically co-present spaces (Hannerz, 1998). For this reason, the emerging literature on mediated interactions tends to describe differences between computer-mediated interactions and face-to-face interactions. One example concerns the legitimacy of doing unrelated tasks in a goal-oriented activity. Analyzing how virtual meetings are organized at a corporate workplace, Wasson (2006) describes that what is commonly known as ''multitasking'' is relatively tolerated in a goal-oriented interaction made in a mediated environment. In addition to the workplace, recent

classrooms that are equipped with computers and internet access are also new spaces where multitasking is acceptable. Students and teachers do not merely share ''a focal event'' in context (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992), but manage ''polyfocal'' activities (Jones, 2004:26). In such a mediated classroom, students are engaged in ''borderwork'' by constantly and collaboratively negotiating and managing an online/offline distinction (Aarsand, 2008). In addition to these studies typically focusing on the use of text-based communication tools such as chatting, emails, and sharing documents online, the impact of ''media space'' (Heath and Luff, 1992) illustrates differences between computer-mediated interactions and face-to-face interactions. In a media space where audio-visual access is provided among remote colleagues at work, the impact of co-present, face-to-face interactions can become lost, resulting in difficulties coordinating collaborative activities. Habitual ways of communicating such as making eye contact, identifying a referent with a pointing gesture, turning toward another person, and coordinating relevant material objects in space are disrupted and may not be conducted as smoothly as they are in a face-to-face environment (Heath et al., 2010:143). People engaged in distributed collaborative environments report unprecedented problems of managing multiple participation frameworks across spaces and understanding cultural differences in order to achieve their institutional goals (e.g., Evaristo, 2003; Hardin et al., 2007; Monteiro and Keating, 2009).

Instead of categorically describing differences between webcam and face-to-face interactions, my focus is to investigate how the ''mutual monitoring possibilities'' fundamental to interaction (Goffman, 1964; Goodwin, 1980) are transformed in webcam interactions. It is taken for granted that an ordinary interaction is face-to-face, located in a bounded space where participants recognize one another's presence. Participants have to be ''close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sense of being perceived'' (Goffman, 1963:19). The significance of face-to-face interaction as a disciplinary premise has begun to be reconsidered in light of emerging technology-mediated interactions. In this paper, I consider webcam interactions to be part of ordinary family interactions situated in home spaces, where participants manage participation frameworks locally and virtually. Specifically I investigate how participants utilize ''communicative affordances'' (Hutchby, 2001), possibilities that features of technology offer for interaction and how the sense of copresence is managed in the course of webcam interaction.

In addition to research about the use of communication technology and embodied interactions, Emancipatory Pragmatics informs my study. Especially building on the idea that advocates the use of indigenous terms for describing pragmatic implications of interactions (Hanks et al., 2009:2), I argue that the habitual use of a webcam among family members creates a shared living space, which I call the virtual *ie*. The *ie* refers to a specific Japanese stem-family system typically symbolized by the multigenerational household composed of two nuclear families – one consisting of the head of the family, his wife, and their unmarried children, and the other consisting of the first son of the family head, his wife, and their children (Embree, 1945; Morioka, 1967). Although participants in this paper do not live in the same domestic compound, frequent webcam interactions across space become an opportunity to produce or reproduce *ie* practices.

When Japan became a nation-state in the late 19th century, the Family Law was implemented to expand primogeniture (the patriarchal stem family system of inheritance), previously confined to the elite, to the entire population. Married couples were required to use the same last name (Hashimoto and Traphagan, 2008) and successors' families were expected to live with their parents in order to take care of them. Since then, the *ie* has been considered one of the important normative frames of reference through which ''transgenerational perpetuation'' (Lebra, 1984:20) is maintained, intra- and intergenerational relationships are negotiated, moral commitments are realized, and social organizations are managed. In contemporary Japan, the co-residence of multiple generations is no longer a prototypical living arrangement as the nuclear family has become a more common residential pattern (e.g., Traphagan, 2004) and forms and implications of the ''mutigenerational household'' have been changing. In one recent ethnographic work on the Japanese family, Clark (1999) reveals that even though each generation lives in separate houses, the separation ''is more symbolic than geographic'' (Clark, 1999:56) as houses are often close enough for a son, his wife, and his mother to visit each other.

A common theme underlying this recent ethnographic research on the *ie* is how Japanese families are oriented to each other's domestic space while organizing their everyday lives and managing intra- and intergenerational relationships. When the son's family and his parents live close but separate as mentioned in Clark's study, they often share everyday domestic activities such as eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner together by commuting to each other's house. In managing such everyday activities, family members attend to complex boundaries of household space in order to maintain privacy while socializing themselves into each other's household.

Building on this line of work, I argue that the creation of virtual *ie* is not a visuo-spatial convergence of two nuclear households via communication technology, but an interactional achievement. To delineate the virtual *ie* as discursive practice, the notion of *uchi* ('home'/'inside'/'in-group'/'my'/'our') is useful. Among many definitions, I pay close attention to the fact that *uchi* refers to both the physical home and its interior life, including its members. *Uchi* emerges as participants coordinate their language, behaviors, and spaces vis-à-vis the axis of collectivity, placing the single 'I' on one end, the collective 'we' on the other (Bachnik, 1994:26). Although the rapid adaptation of communication technologies is not limited