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# People and Phones

**Research recently made available to CU provides valuable insights into the way people use their phones, and attitudes to the phone, in Australia.**

A grant from the Telecom Research Fund for Social and Policy Research enabled the detailed analysis of data from nearly 700 respondents about their use of the domestic phone. The research was carried out at the University of New England, where Professor Grant Noble and his team have made a significant and pioneering contribution to the body of research about telephone use in Australia - a field which is still in relative infancy. The report of the research team<sup>1</sup> on this project includes a useful summary of existing Australian research.

Previous research by Grant Noble in a series of studies showed that the domestic phone is a vital community-maintaining instrument enabling friends, family and extended kin groups to maintain identities in dispersed environments. The main aim of the present study was to conduct a comprehensive statistical analysis and interpretation to identify individual differences in the use of, and attitudes to the domestic phone, in particular age, sex and place of residence differences.

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## No Funding for Second Phase

The Telecom Fund provided \$19,000 for two distinct exercises, the one mentioned above and a second phase - the planning, organisation and preparation of a new study which would investigate how people in rural and remote areas use the telephone and related ancillary technology.

Announcing plans for the second study, Grant Noble said:

*Little has yet been learnt about how telecommunications are used by country dwellers and now that people are free to choose between two telecommunications carriers (Optus and Telecom), it is timely to find out just how much and for what reasons rural people use the domestic telephone. We also want to find out how and why people use other telephone devices such as fax machines, answerphones and the mobile telephone'*

All the preliminary work for the second study has been undertaken and a detailed questionnaire has been developed and piloted. An innovative aspect was that country people were to be invited to call a 008 number in order to participate in the research. Those calling would be sent a survey form and telephone diary sheets to record their phone use, and would be invited to participate in a telephone interview at a later date.

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<sup>1</sup> Grant Noble, Ed Campbell, Jens J Hansen, Nicholas Hansen, Elizabeth and Natasha Noble, Family Phone Calls in the Gesellschaft Era: Gemeinschaft Lives On, University of New England February 1993.

The grants committee did not however approve funding for the second phase and it is now unlikely that the fieldwork will be completed.

It will be ironical if this study does not proceed. Only recently, AUSTEL's report into rural and remote communications (see CU 86), which highlighted particular needs among rural and remote communities, including Aboriginal communities, recommended an extensive program to identify the needs of these communities.

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## The First Study

The data for the first study was originally collected in 1986 but could not be analysed until funding was available. A total of 676 questionnaires were completed by 336 males and 340 females, with 40 per cent in the age range 15-24, 33 per cent in the 25-39 range and 27 per cent in the range 39 plus. Thirty nine per cent lived in metropolitan areas and 61 per cent outside capital cities. Most respondents were separated from their families.

One of the key researchers was a mathematician and the study has, the researchers say, a 'heavy statistical skew' which was necessary in order to tease out of the data 'as many hidden secrets as possible'. As a result, it is not easy to summarise the findings in a way which a non-statistician would readily understand. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw out some notable points.

The study used two terms to describe different types of telephone calls. A *Functional Call* describes the use of the phone for tasks like conducting business, reacting to emergencies, carrying out shopping, reporting illness, arranging or modifying or planning events, rather than for social reasons. A *Relational Call* is made for maintaining social contact with family and friends.

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## Gender Differences and Attitudes

As might be expected, the study showed that women on average tend to make and receive more relational calls than men, while men are greater users of the phone for functional matters (see bar charts).

Gender is the factor most clearly related to difference in attitude to the phone, with extremely marked differences between men and women. The phone enables women, rather than men, to feel less lonely and more secure; provides more desired contact with the family; and enables easier expression of feelings - possibly at the cost of being more compelled to answer a ringing phone. Men do not perceive such benefits in the way women do.

The researchers suggest that 'men [may] reserve a work-orientated attitude originating from their work phones, which is different from the women's community

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and family phone orientation, related to the home phone'.

This assumption might be viewed by some as sexist, but given that the sample for this study was skewed towards non-metropolitan dwellers who may exhibit more 'traditional' lifestyles and attitudes, it may be realistic. CU doubts however that there would be much difference between city women and their country sisters in terms of their 'social' use of the phone. Seminal research by Ann Moyal in 1989 into women's use of the phone showed the importance of the phone in the lives of women in general.

Among all respondents, the strongest response in terms of attitudes to the phone was agreement with the statement that having a phone aids ease of contact with family (over 90 per cent agreeing), followed by agreement that the phone makes telling white lies easier (75 per cent). Asked to respond in their own words, people said the main reason they liked the phone was because it is quick, easy and convenient; the main reason for disliking it was that it could ring at inconvenient times, or interrupt activity. The predominant reason for liking to receive phone calls was networking, while a significant number of people said calls helped overcome loneliness.

The feeling that the telephone provides security was strongly related to age, with older people expressing this more than younger people. Similarly, older people were more likely to agree that the phone permitted easier expression of feelings.

## Factors Affecting Phone Usage

Age is the most significant demographic determinant of phone calls, though age differences work in different ways for different types of call. For example, older people were more likely to make and receive calls to/from relatives, while younger people were more likely to make and receive calls to/from friends.

Gender is also strongly related to phone calls, although far more for relational than for functional calls. Women are much less likely to receive functional calls from business contacts and acquaintances than men are, while the exact opposite applies with relational calls. Women both make and receive calls to/from family and friends more often than men; about two thirds of those who make/receive relational calls at least twice a week are women while half the men rarely or never make/receive such calls.

Calls are very strongly related to feelings of loneliness, with those making/receiving more calls being less lonely and vice versa.

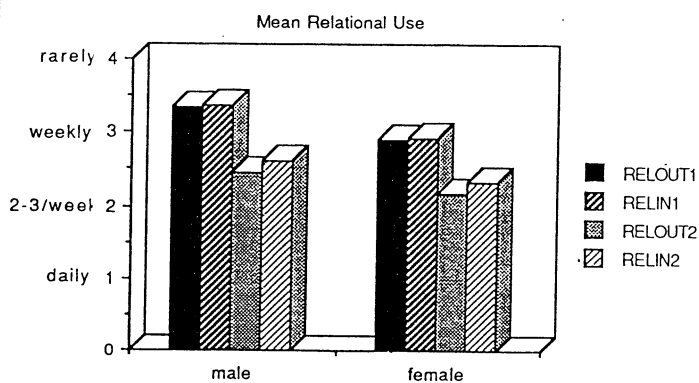
A test for probabilities of phone use revealed that demographic variables can be used to predict who is to receive calls from sales people and business contacts and acquaintances. The researchers comment that this suggests that people are not in control of their phones, but rather that telephone technology puts the outside world - certainly in terms of business orientated calls - in control.

## The Question of Cost

People living outside the city make relational calls less frequently than their city counterparts. The number of 'friendship' calls both made and received is greater in the metropolitan area than elsewhere, and more family calls are made and received by family members when relatives live in the same place. STD charges and timed calls within rural regions clearly deter people in these areas from making these calls, and this issue would have been explored further in the second study.

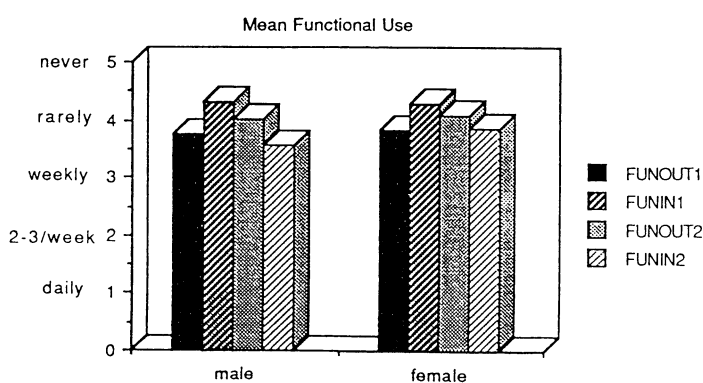
The further people were forced to live apart, the fewer family calls they were likely to make, because of the cost of such calls. This suggests that current marketing strategies by the carriers, offering STD discount packages aimed at family callers, may be targeting a receptive market. □

### Relational Use of Telephone by Gender



RELOUT1 to relatives  
 RELIN1 from relatives  
 RELOUT2 to friends  
 RELIN2 from friends

### Functional Use of Telephone by Gender



FUNOUT1 for shopping and services  
 FUNIN1 from sales-personnel  
 FUNOUT2 for information (eg. time, timetables)  
 FUNIN2 from business contacts and acquaintances