Mobile Phone Parenting: reconfiguring relationships between Filipina mothers and their children in the Philippines.

Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller

Abstract

The Philippines is an intensely migrant society with a million people leaving the country each year and over ten per cent of the population working abroad. Crucially, a large number of emigrants are female who often have children left behind. The relationships within such transnational families depend on long distance communication, which, for Filipinos (as many others in developing countries), is becoming increasingly reliant upon mobile phones. In addition, with several million texts sent each day, the Philippines has been considered the texting capital of the world. This paper draws on research carried out with Filipina mothers - mainly domestic workers and nurses – in London and Cambridge. This year-long fieldwork was followed by research with the children of these same mothers in the areas around Manila as well as with other left behind children. This research strategy allows us to directly compare the experience of mothers and their children. In general, the mothers feel that the phone has allowed them to partially reconstruct their role as parents, and may even use this to justify remaining in the UK. By contrast their children are much more ambivalent about its consequences and sometimes resentful about the interference and control that phones provide for absent mothers and their assumptions that they can now effectively be mothers again. Together these allow us to consider how far the phone itself can be constitutive of such a significant relationship as motherhood.

'And you have a duty to your family. Who are married? Raise your hands. Are you going to bring your family? That will take two to three years. Be careful, you might end up marrying residents there. You might completely forget about your family in the Philippines. Do not do that, because your family is the reason why you're leaving the country. You're providing financial and moral support to your family in the Philippines. And you have to communicate. You have to communicate with your family as often as you can. There's no excuse not to, because we all have cell phones now. In the previous years, OFWs [Overseas Foreign Workers] didn't have cell phones. How did they communicate? They'd send letters because overseas calls were very expensive. Sometimes they'd record their voices. The families here would listen to them on radio through cassette tapes. But shipping takes a while. It takes one month, two months to send something to your loved ones. But nowadays, there's no excuse anymore. You have the cell phone. You can call your loved ones. You cannot abandon your families, okay?'

Seminar leader, Pre-departure orientation seminar (PDOS), Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA), Manila, January 2009.

This extract captures the convergence of two phenomena that characterise the contemporary Philippines: mobile communication and migration. The Philippines has witnessed a boom in the usage of mobile phones which, as in other developing countries, are becoming the dominant medium of communication given the scarcity of landlines (Ling and Donner, 2009). The significance of mobile phones for the Philippines, in particular, was captured early on in the events surrounding the 2001 EDSA II when millions of people demonstrated in the eponymous Manila thoroughfare to protest against the corruption of President Estrada's administration. It was then claimed that mobile phones had facilitated the coordination of these protests, which led to the ousting of Estrada, leading to the phone being elevated to a symbol of people's power (Castells, 2008; Pertierra, 2002; Rafael, 2003). But there have been other profound consequences for everyday life through the millions of SMSs sent each day which have led to the Philippines being termed the texting capital of the world.

The trend towards large-scale and state sponsored labour migration began in the 1970 following the oil boom in the Middle East leading to a high demand for foreign workers.Migration has intensified since, with nearly a third of shipping manned by Filipino male workers (Lamvik, 2002) and Filipina women becoming recognised throughout the world for domestic and care work (Parreñas 2001). Rather uniquely, the Philippine state has played a pivotal role in the intensification of overseas migration through policies that have systematically promoted and encouraged the phenomenon (Acacio 2008; Asis, 2005), 'steering itself to become a major source country of workers' (Assis, 2005: 27). Today over 10 per cent of the population are working abroad and there more than a million new emigrants – the majority of them women – leaving the country each year, making the Philippines one of the most intensely emigrant societies. As a large proportion of these women are already mothers, their migration involves separation from their children. The social costs of migration and the viability of these relationships is a matter of concern in the Philippines and it is no surprise that mobile communication is being considered as one means of alleviating the problems of family separation (refs).

This paper is devoted to precisely this question: what is the impact of mobile communications on transnational family relationships and in particular those between mothers and children? It is derived from a larger ESRC funded study of the consequences of improved media communication on transnational relationships. We spent over a year conducting fieldwork mainly with Filipino women, though some men, in London and Cambridge. These women are mainly employed as domestic workers and nurses and most came to the UK after periods in the Middle East or Hong Kong. Crucially, most of these women are mothers separated from their children throughout their children's development. We subsequently spent the winter of 08-09 in the Philippines talking to the children of these mothers as well as other left behind children in four provinces around Metropolitan Manila. All the children were over 17 years old at the time of the interviews. Overall, we interviewed 103 people including 20 pairs of mothers and children. In addition, while in the Philippines, we also interviewed officials from

government agencies and regulatory bodies dealing with migration, as well as migration agencies, NGOs and telecommunications companies.

The Philippine migration context

The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) estimate for overseas Filipinos (December 2007) is 8,726,520, over 10 per cent of the population (POEA 2008). This includes 900,023 irregular migrants, but other evidence suggests this figure is much higher. For example, telecom officials estimate irregulars as 30% of the whole, which would give a total of around 12 million emigrants. About half of these migrants are deployed on fixed term contracts that require renewal, and these and other restrictions (also in the legal frameworks of receiving countries) make it difficult for women to be joined by their families.[1] By 2006 annual deployment was in excess of a million per annum (POEA 2008 and Asis 2008) meeting government targets and trends towards 'a more aggressive marketing of Filipinos as global workers' (Asis, 2005: 34, quoting past Labour Secretary St. Thomas) . Recent years have seen a growth in female migration for nursing, care and domestic work rather than male work on ships (POEA 2008). Emigrants remitted $14.5 billion in 2007 (Asis 2008) nearly double the figure for 2003 creating a level of dependency for the economy as a whole. This is associated with the almost unique situation in which the government itself has become the sponsor of overseas migration as a clear economic strategy for the country as a whole (Acacio 2008; Asis 2008). Since the time of Marcos these workers have been called the heros and heroines of the economy, while the current President Macapagal-Arroyo refers in speeches to the Philippines as the home of the great worker (Asis 2005: 27). This attitude is fully reflected in the kind of government sponsored seminars with which we began this paper.

The POEA and the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) estimate that there are 203,035 Filipinos in the UK making it the sixth most popular destination. Although again officials from telecommunications companies whom we interviewed, give statistics for

---

[1] The Philippine government has bilateral agreements with receiving countries (for example, several within the Middle East) to provide overseas workers (OFWs) on limited time contracts.

incoming call traffic that suggest a higher figure. This population consists primarily of nurses, caregivers and domestic workers. Figures from 2002 suggest that at least 50% of the UK Filipino population was female (Asis, 2005). The British National Health Service (NHS) recruited systematically from the Philippines from the late 1990s to mid 2000 such that most of UK based Filipinos are employed in the medical sector. Not counted in the official statistics are many Filipinas who come to the UK on student visas but who are also employed as caregivers in private nursing homes. Such 'student visa' schemes have become popular since the NHS stopped recruiting from the Philippines and involve some hours of teaching per week and then up to 40 hours of work in care homes for which students receive the minimum wage. Finally, in the UK as throughout the world, Filipinas have a high reputation as domestic workers and nannies.

Transnational families and separation

The problem of family separation is becoming increasingly recognised as a consequence of the international division of labour affecting primarily developing countries such as Mexico (Dreby, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997), Ecuador (Pribilsky, 2004) and Sri Lanka (Widding Isaksen et als, 2008).Widding Isaksen et als (2008) argue that for poor countries a 'care drain' complements the better documented 'brain drain'. Hochschild (2000) first developed the concept of 'global care chains' for countries such as the Philippines where migrants are often already mothers. It applies, for example, when a woman migrates from Manila to Hong Kong in order to care for another family's children so that the parents can work, but in order to do so leaves her own children under the care of a woman from the rural Philippines, who in turn has left her children in the care of a relative in her village. These 'care chains' are seen as an aspect of uneven development globally, which they reinforce, extracting care labour as 'emotional surplus value' from developing countries with 'the Beverley Hills child [getting] surplus love' (Hochschild 2000: 136). Although the 'care chains' approach was intended as a response to the limitations of 'market-derived concepts [which] prevent us from grasping migration as a social phenomenon in its entirety' (Widding Isaksen *et als*, 2008: 419-20), it does not depart radically from a narrow framing of migrants as economically driven labourers who respond to global economic forces. Critics have argued that a care chains

approach does not sufficiently acknowledge the agency and self-reflexivity of migrants themselves in determining their own trajectory (Yeates, 2004; McKay, 2007), or the empowering potential of migration for women (evident in our own research). It also assumes a normative and universal perspective of biological motherhood which should be performed in a situation of co-presence. In our work we are not only considering the issue of communications technologies, but also using this to re-think what we mean by a relationship (e.g. Miller 2007, 2009) under the circumstances of radical deterritorialisation.

Several previous studies have explored the consequences of separation for Filipino families (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; McKay, 2007; Parreñas, 2005a and b). Parreñas has focused specifically on the problem of left behind children comparing those with fathers or mothers abroad (2005a) and what she sees as the persistence of traditional gender expectations. Despite the challenges catalyzed by globalization and the international division of labour, according to Parreñas, 'the ideology of women's domesticity remains intact in the Philippines' (2005a: 168) When fathers migrate, Parreñas argues, mothers take on additional paternal roles. Conversely, when mothers migrate, fathers continue to be, or become absent (2005a and 2005b). Fresnosa-Flot (2009: 266) comparing regular and undocumented Filipina migrants in France, agrees with Parreñas that migration has not emancipated these women from the traditional gender norms, their roles as mothers actually becoming emphasized through migration. Pingol (2001), on the other hand, based on her research in Ilocos Norte in the Northern Philippines observes a more varied response by left behind fathers relating to several local models of masculinity.

McKay (2007), drawing on ethnographic research amongst the Ifugao in the Northern Philippines, offers an alternative perspective challenging Parreñas' approach. She describes how fulfilling one's financial and communication obligations can enhance intimacy and strengthen relationships within the family in the Philippines (McKay, 2007: 188) highlighting the role of economic provision as an integral part of emotional nurturing (for a a similar argument see Pribilsky, 2004 on Ecuador). Along with

Constable (1999), McKay (2007: 177) has also stressed the more reflexive and nuanced ways in which migrants interpret their experiences, which accords with our own findings.

Although references have been made to mobile phones in these writings they are not generally the dedicated focus of research. The exception is Parreñas who in an article has argued that mobile phone communication has contributed to the persistence of gender inequalities as it creates the expectation that mothers will continue to perform their caring role and emotional work from a distance (Parreñas 2005b). However, we felt the media should be subject to more systematic research given that parenting in these transnational families may depend entirely upon communication especially where migrants facing visa restrictions are spending many years unable to return to see their children even for a fleeting visit.

The mobile phone explosion

The Philippines resembles other developing countries in terms of the dominance of cell phones and the scarcity of landlines which initially also entailed low internet adoption rates (recently internet through laptop dongles are coming into play although are still expensive for working or lower middle class families). In 2006 there were 42,868,911 mobile phone subscribers out of a population of approximately 88.5 million (Philippine Statistical Yearbook 2007: 1324) up from 15.3 million in 2002. This figure contrasts to 7,198,922 installed telephone landlines with 3,633,188 subscribers in 2006 (Philippine Statistical Yearbook 2007: 1322) more than half of whom are located in the Capital region (ibid: 1323). Over half of all landlines are controlled by PLDT the dominant player in this market. Although there are 8 mobile phone networks, the market is dominated by Globe and Smart with over 16 million and 17 million subscribers each (ibid.: 1324).

Most of our interviews start from a very different experience of transnational life based on communication through letters and occasional cassettes tapes. Phone calls were rare and expensive. By contrast, mobile phones today form part of a communication ecology

with multiple channels including Yahoo Messanger, Skype, Webcam, email and social networking sites dominated by Friendster and Facebook. Within this it was the rise of mobile phone technology that opened up the possibilities for instant and frequent communication. Vertovec FULL REF)

Our initial quotation illustrates the pronounced optimism about the possibilities of mobile phones in alleviating the social costs of migration found in some of the government bodies that regulate and manage migration. The POEA the state authority which manages migration and processes the documents of all Filipino migrants, organizes a series of mandatory pre-departure orientation seminars (PDOS) intended to prepare them for their life abroad. Predictably, the optimism expressed in such seminars is also shared by the telecommunications companies, though they were surprisingly late in focusing upon the OFW market. Globe, in particular, is the major sponsor of POEA and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) the government agency dealing with OFW welfare. For example, Globe sponsors OWWA's annual 'Model OFW Family of the Year Award' for a financially successful migrant family whose members maintain close family ties despite separation. In their own advertising they claim 'With Globe's Worldwide Services, the family will always be together' [*Palagi buo ang pamilya*]; and, "Christmas is more colorful and happier when the family is together'

The Mothers' Perspective
Previously voice communication between mothers and left behind children was rare and expensive. A considerable number of our participants' families in the Philippines still do not have landlines, which in previous decades was considered a luxury even in cities like Manila. Many of our participants come from low income rural areas, where calls had to be pre-arranged by mail and took place through public phones, or a family visit to a relative's house.

Access to landlines was also difficult for migrant mothers in the initial employment in places such as Middle East or Hong Kong. Apart from occasional access to employer's phones they also relied on public phones which are 'Very expensive! More than ten

pounds, twenty pounds. Oh my God. The telephone eats your money very quick.'
(Gladys). Elisa recalls weekends in Saudi when : 'We had to queue to wait for the
telephone […] And we'd have to bang it sometimes because it's not working'. Barbara
had to get an extra part time just to pay the telephone bills. Still they would call, for a few
minutes, just to hear the voice of their children. Once the Filipinas in London obtained
their own lines they started calling regularly, usually on weekends and particularly on
Sundays after mass when all family would be at home.

But advent of the mobile phone represented a true catalyst for new developments in
communications. Initiated by the mothers who first obtained them and used call cards to
facilitate contact. Initially expensive but now affordable, telephone cards are now almost
universally used by our participants. Once the children and other relatives in the
Philippines acquired mobile phones – typically after 2000 –communication became even
more regular. Mothers could now reach each relative, on their own phone, rather than just
speak to whoever happened to be at home. Being able to call their children individually
helped them to fulfil mothering responsibilities as they saw them: for example, checking
that children had returned from a night out and that they had done their homework.

However, mobile phone communication is marked by some profound asymmetries of
which the most conspicuous is that it is much cheaper for those abroad to call the
Philippines, while international calling from the Philippines remains extremely expensive
by local standards even with telephone cards. Companies like Globe have very recently
introduced international calling cards based on prepaid credit. However, we only found
one participant who had purchased such a card, and they had yet to use it. At 100 pesos
for only 12 minutes of talk time to UK landline numbers[2] this remains a considerable sum
for working class families. Such cards however are an improvement from the past when
calls were even more expensive. Nina recalled, for example, how her daughter in the late
1990s once spent more than 8,000 pesos for one hour's phone call on her mobile (more
than the average Filipino monthly salary). So while a mother can call her children

---

[2] Calls to mobile phones are more costly. Duration of call varies according to destination country with the
US-bound calls representing the best value.

whenever she feels she needs to hear their voice and express her feelings, they cannot afford to do the same. Our informants within the major mobile phone networks reported a ratio of seven minutes inbound for every one minute outbound call from the Philippines. Parreñas saw this imbalance as an additional reason why mobile communication is not always effective as a means of sustaining mother-child relationships (2005b).

However, other features of mobile phones have been used to balance these asymmetries in that at least now those in the Philippines can signal to their mothers that they need to speak with them and that their mothers should call them back either through a missed call to their UK number; or a text to their mother's roaming phone. Almost all the mothers we spoke to had such a second mobile phone with a Filipino roaming sim card essentially to receive these SMS's since an SMS to a roaming phone is charged at the local rate of one peso, compared to 20 pesos for an SMS to a UK mobile number. This communication, however, can still lead to frustrations: Sandra said that when '[my children] miss me they want right away to [reach] me. It's like me also. Sometimes you have this misunderstanding. I would really like to talk to them because I have my time but they are in school. So I'm 'Why aren't you answering the phone!'

Children text their mothers or make a missed call when there is an emergency, or just when they want to have a chat. Additionally, great deal of this communication is phatic – it is the fact that there is communication rather than any actual content that acts as an affirmation of the relationship and emotion. For example, an SMS that just says '*kumusta*?' [how are you]. Also common is the forwarding of religious texts, essentially as a reminder of 'I'm here and I'm thinking of you'. Lourdes told us that even though religious messages are not always authored by those who forward them, they not impersonal. It is the way in which her family support her when they know that she is unhappy. She takes strength from these messages, from reading them over and over again, when she is travelling on the bus, or before she goes to bed, storing them on her handset. Texts also arrive on special occasions such as birthdays, religious holidays and mother's day. Part and parcel of such communication is when children will often text their mothers to say that they need more money, or ask for specific things, demands

which sometimes dominate the concerns of young children and teenagers. Although our participants invariably respond to such demands there may also experience them as intrusive, or inappropriately demanding, especially when such texted demands come from more distant relatives or wider acquaintances. Given bilateral kinship systems the number of relatives who may feel they have rights to such requests can easily proliferate (see Miller and Madianou forthcoming)

Another important function of texts is that they facilitate coordination, so for example a mother would send a text after having sent a remittance and would similarly receive a text to say this has been safely received. Texts also help coordinate communication through other media. For example, Gladys will text her son Fernando and his family to say: 'get your webcam ready, I'm waiting for you on YM (Yahoo Messenger)'. So mobile phones are also help to organise communication as a whole.

Although mothers receive texts on their roaming phones, they reply by calling or texting from their UK registered numbers because it is cheaper. The roaming phone is always on, as a constant bridge between the families and themselves through the receipt of texts. They make sure that they add credit (load) once every month so that the subscription does not expire. While they most commonly receive texts, they generally prefer to respond with voice calls, although there are some occasions when they also use SMSs more frequently. Angela has asked her sister who looks after her daughter to text her when Florencia is late from a night out and will use texting with her sister generally when asking factual questions. On the whole mothers showed a clear preference for voice over texting. They claim voice enables conversation and deliberation which is impossible in the 150 characters allowed per text. More importantly, voice allows for the expression of emotion and, crucially, enables them to gauge how their children are doing. 'I can tell how she feels from her voice' Angela told us. 'I can hear what they feel' said Mirasol. 'Hearing their voice is [like] hugging them' she added.

Cheap mobile phone calls have created a platform for intensive mothering from a distance. Lourdes begins her day by calling all four of her children now in their 20s and

early 30s. 'I want to know what they are doing, what are their plans, what help I can give to them, what is the problem, so I know'. She calls them through a telephone card by using her free off peak minutes. She sometimes also calls them in the evening, just before she goes to bed when it will be early morning in the Philippines. Lourdes has three phones, one for roaming, one for off-peak phone calls and one for any time, any one. She uses about five telephone cards a week. She spends on average £200 a month on phone bills, international call cards and load for her Filipino roaming phone which is a significant percentage of her monthly salary. Diana and Greta spend even more and at times have spent up to £400 a month on phone bills and telephone cards. Budgeting is difficult, but at least with cards it is clear how much the call is costing and how much they have left. Many participants here as elsewhere (Fortunati, 2002; Horst and Miller, 2006: chapter 4) see their mobile phones a treasured possession and also a major source of recreation.

Greta also calls first thing in the morning. Instead of phone cards, she calls from her pc via SKYPE's paid service of VOIP pc-to-mobile phones which means she can afford longer conversations. She would prefer to use SKYPE free pc-to-pc, but the family home in Bulacan still does not have a landline and thus no internet. Wireless internet connection is very expensive by local standards and was not an option for most of our participants. Greta also calls her children before she goes to bed in order to wake them up for school. As a trained teacher herself she helps her children with their homework and answers any questions that they do not understand. She always knows what they are having for dinner and often advises the grandmother (*lola*) who cares for them in her absence. Greta is one of our informants who left in 2002 during the mobile phone boom and has always been able to maintain constant contact with her children. In her case her children's mobile phones are the only means of reaching them. Diana prefers to make short, but more frequent phone calls several times in the day: to check what her son has eaten, or whether he has done his homework, or if he is playing games on the internet which she disapproves of.

These findings confirm to an extent Parreñas' observations that women, despite their physical absence, still perform all parenting and emotional work from a distance as opposed to the physically present fathers who are conspicuously less involved (Parreñas 2005a). Very few fathers in our research were or had been directly involved in the parenting of our participants. Although we agree with Parreñas'(2005b) observations about the imbalanced division of domestic labour, , our findings suggest that impact of mobile phones is much more complex and nuanced.

So from the perspective of mothers experiencing an extended form of separation, punctuated by infrequent return visits, not only because of distance and costs, but because their legal status may make this impossible, their relationships to their children depend very heavily on mediated communication. This explains perhaps why several of our participants, including Greta told us that they would not have decided to extend their migration had they not been able to maintain constant communication with their children. The ability to communicate and perform parenting from a distance allows these women to feel more confident in making their own decision whether or not to stay or return to the Philippines. Although economic reasons are pivotal for the initial decision to migrate, there is a point in the migration cycle when the most compelling reasons that forced our informants away from their families have been dealt with. Yet, most decide to prolong the migration. This may be for the further improvement of their economic and symbolic capital (Caglar, 1995), or their own self improvement and respect. It may be increasing ambivalence about the Philippines compared to their new country of residence (Constable 1999), or incessant demands from wider networks of relatives and friends. Elsewhere we have argued that migrants face an extreme form of ambivalence as they are torn between their love for their children and the respect and value they get from their work (Madianou and Miller in preparation). Mobile phones– together with other communications media – are the means through which they can attempt to deal with and reconcile this ambivalence.

We can broadly distinguish between two narratives: between those who left the Philippines before the advent of mobile phones and who therefore also experienced a

period when communication was through letters and cassette tapes. And those who left the Philippines more recently and have thus always been able to maintain frequent communication. The latter are the ones who call more frequently, possibly because their children are of a younger age but also because there is this expectation that communication will be seamless since the technology allows for that. The other distinctions are between migrants whose status is irregular as opposed to regular (this has implications on whether the mothers can actually visit their children as those without legal documents are restricted in terms of travel) and between nurses and domestic workers. The former usually come from more a more middle class and urban background and thus the family in the Philippines is more likely to have a landline and internet connection and more likely to eventually join them in the UK.

The Children's Perspective

As might be anticipated we encountered a wide range of experiences amongst the children as amongst the mothers. But if, in general, we can say that the mothers do indeed see new media as to some degree being able to reconstitute their role as mother and thereby ameliorating their situation of absence, then we can also say, in general that the children do not feel their mothers have successfully reconstituted this role and often view the impact of new media as quite negative. Nora discusses this explicitly. In reflecting upon the improvement in communication noted `You'd think that we'd have a better relationship or that she'd be more present in my life, but it wasn't really the case. I think it just makes it more convenient. I use 'convenient' because it's for practical concerns, like "Are the bills getting paid" or "Are you still in school" or "What are you doing now?" or "Are you sick or well" but then for the depth and quality of relationship you want, it's not dependent on those things.' In such cases the clearest evidence for this failure of improved communication comes when the mother returns to visit. The children have established the norms of behaviour with their grandmother who looks after them, which are then challenged as the returning mother seeks to demonstrate her parental role `my grandmother wasn't that strict about these things. And then she comes and says "I confiscate your phones, you can't use them over dinner." And it's like, "Whatever mom, you're not even here." And then she'd get all our phones and say "You can't read at the

table." And we'd had this life for the longest time. Suffice it to say that it wasn't easy. We all couldn't wait for her to… we were kind of torn because we were all waiting for her to go back, so we could get on with our lives, but then there was also a side that just missed her so much and she wasn't there for the longest time so we just want to spend time with her. '

An even more extreme case is with Nelia who clearly felt that the improvement in communication is more there to satisfy the mother that she is now a parent again than of any actual benefit to the child. When asked how often her mother phoned she says `once every two weeks. Or everytime she feels bored there….I thought it was a lot because sometimes, especially if you're not together, you don't really have anything in common anymore…. She talks to us for about an hour and then we'll get really irritated by then. And then we'll just find someone to pass the phone to.' In fact in this case having failed to elicit the children's engagement in something that might have extended the conversation, such as gossip about other people, the mother most commonly would end up having very extensive conversations with the yaya who was employed to look after the children.

Mothers sometimes would often have a particular time of the week when they would phone, while some children found this reassuring others saw it as irritating complaining that they would be hanging around during a weekend for a phone call when they had better more interesting things to be doing, and this becomes yet another source of resentment. One of the most common ways in which this failure of parenting is expressed by the child is for them to tell stories about the degree to which, although the parent was trying to be present, they were clearly quite unaware as the actual age of their children. As they saw it their parents refused to acknowledge that they were growing up, and this was resented. So for example Ricardo states `Even when I was working already, for the first two years of my work, I was a High School teacher, and they still treated me as if I were a student. Because they don't see the changes that happened here. They still think that I'm a young child.' One way this was often made evident to the children came through the things that the parents sent back as presents. Often these were toys, even

teddy bears, clearly suited to children some years younger than they actually were at the time. So even though the parents might now be in constant contact it demonstrated that this did not mean the parents were actually having a better understanding of who their children were.

In those cases where mothers chose to use the phone to call constantly this can be seen as quite intrusive. As Ernesto complained: They could call anytime […] they could call you wherever you were. And this was the time when I had this girlfriend when mobile phones became popular in the Philippines. So they could call me (to ask) where I was and I had to lie that I wasn't with the girl. I was studying, stuff like that. So in a sense, I could still subvert it, but I was still really nervous every time they'd call. Like, "oh my god, my parents are calling again!" I get jumpy. Similarly Nelia told us how uncomfortable she felt when her mother started calling her after she found out that she had a boyfriend. : `She was asking how long we have been together. Things like that. Don't have sex. Things like that. […] And I'll get really irritated with her because it was really awkward. No, [I didn't feel close to her]. I felt that she really didn't want me to have a boyfriend.'

The asymmetry in communication noted above can also be resented by children. Anita found that her mother started calling more frequently when she obtained a mobile phone, but she could not afford to phone back and expand the relationship from her side. She instead turned more to email as this gives her the space in which to expand her thoughts and feelings. She also found the constraining of the calls around the calling card frustrating: 'My mother would always go, "I can only call you for 10 minutes because the card is not enough." Something like that. It's very limited. Whatever you want to say is very limited. The kinds of conversations you have is always about money, practical things. You don't really have the time to be closer, "Mom take care of yourself." Things that you usually do like express feelings to your parents because it's very limited, the phone'.

Conversely, some participants reported more positive experiences. What Ofelia found attractive about voice communication is its length: 'if I use the phone, it can last for an

hour, I can really tell [my mother] about things and she can feel my emotions, with the phone'. Ofelia never experienced a gap in communication with her mother as she left after the mobile phone boom and there was always the expectation that they would speak on the phone frequently. Overall, children whose parents have left more recently, after the mobile phone boom, and who had not then experienced this period of infrequent communications recounted more positive experiences about mobile phone communication. Moreover, because of the expectation of frequent communication, these families seemed to be prepared to face the higher costs of telephone bills. Indeed in some cases the children found their mothers more active after they had left than before. When Cecilia's mother left for the US she bought her family a satellite phone as their house in Ifugao did not have a landline nor access to a mobile signal. After she left and during her first year abroad the mother would call everyday and effectively micromanage the household. `She would call every morning [at] around 6:30am. And [she would say] like, "Wake up! It's time for school!", "What are you having for breakfast?" She would spend like $500-$800 a month for phone bills 'cause she literally calls everyday…'cause like sometime even at night, "Is your brother home?" or like… "Who's home?" Ironically, Cecilia thought that when her mother had been in the Philippines she had been much less present in the lives of her children as she was commuting to a different city for work.

Cecilia, like several other participants, was also positive about the potential of media to reduce the embarrassment in expressing intimacy, noting it is easier 'to say things on the phone than to talk to [my mother] in person'. Nelia also mentioned that 'I would make it a point to say "I love you" to her, or "Goodnight" whenever we talked with her on the phone. But we really didn't usually do that while she was here because it was embarrassing, and we didn't see the need to'. While as a written, non-simultaneous format, Texting facilitated other aspects of communication such as asking for money or gifts.

Conclusions

This article began by observing the enthusiasm surrounding the potential of mobile phones in addressing the social costs of migration and most notably the separation between mothers and children. This enthusiasm is present in the Philippines not only among the telecommunications industry itself which has recently begun to tap into the OFW market (albeit with some delay), but also the government migration agencies and regulatory bodies which perhaps uniquely see migration as a positive aspect of state economic policy. Our aim, by contrast, has been to assess the impact as experienced by those for whom it has greatest consequences, separated mothers and their children.

It is clear that the introduction of mobile phones represents a significant improvement in the quality of life of transnational households, at least when compared to the previous situation where they lacked any kind of affordable communication. This would be most evident for those from the lowest income background. Our participants were quite diverse in that respect. In general nurses tended to come from a more affluent or middle class background while domestics and undocumented workers tended to come from more rural an impoverished areas, which meant that few of these had previously had access to landlines. These latter had also experienced more disruption with often extended periods of separation when they were unable to return home for visits. The mere fact that one could now have phones for emergencies, as a means to coordinate transfers of money and gifts, and just to be able to express care and concern when one chose, was clearly of considerable benefit.

So it is not surprising that our participants felt much happier now that they are able to fulfil their parental obligations and thus feel able to be mothers again. They gain strength themselves as well as emotional fulfilment especially through voice communication. The storage capacity of their phones allows them to keep texts and pictures which read again and again. Mobile phone communication allows them to deal with the ambivalence that is deeply ingrained in their decision to migrate or choose to stay in the UK to the extent that some now claim they feel able to remain in the UK only because the phone has allowed them to resolve this contradiction and actually become effective transnational parents. In

this sense it is too reductionist to say that mobile phones simply exacerbate gender inequalities as Parreñas has argued (2005a).

What we have tried to show, however, is that this improvement in communication potential is not an unalloyed blessing, and contains within it new asymmetries and quite different perspectives on its consequences. Perhaps the most poignant asymmetry is that children on the whole cannot afford to call their mothers. The ratio of inbound/outbound minutes is 7:1. There is also the differences in experiences between those mothers who left before and those who left after the mobile phone explosion, who never experienced the same gap in their communication. This shows that current experiences remain closely tied to the previous histories of both the media and the relationships.

Our most important finding is the marked discrepancy between the accounts of the mothers and their children, which we were able to determine because we chose to conduct fieldwork in such a manner that would allow us to work with both parents and also the actual children of those parents left behind in the Philippines. As far as the mothers are concerned the most significant impact of mobile communication lies in their ability to reconstitute their role as effective parents. Through their mobile phones they can be involved in the everyday parenting of their children and even micromanage their meals, homework and discipline issues. Mobile phone allows for the performance of intensive mothering.

Their own children, by contrast, do not always feel as positive about the impact of mobile phones on their relationship to their mothers, and often experience the constant presence of mothers – especially if this comes after years of absence and little communication – as interference and embarrassment. Children are ambivalent too: they may find that telephone calls are always too short and unsatisfactory, yet try to initiate communication themselves to confirm parental love. They may also found the return of their mother as a constant presence disrupts the more idealised image of their mother they had projected during her absence (Miller and Madianou forthcoming). In such situations both sides use the different capacities of phones to try and control their end of the relationship. The

ability of voice to more effectively convey emotion than text may be something that they therefore seize upon, or something that they avoid, depending on their goals with regard to this relationship. In some cases they may feel that mothers have become more open and more engaged than they ever were when they lived together in the same household.

This evidence should make us cautious about simply accepting normative models with regard either to the relationships or to the phones. Media as an instrument of mediation leads to a constant renegotiation and reconfiguration of relationships. This is particularly important in this situation of absence when the relationship itself is largely constituted by communication. In this paper we have taken what may be regarded as an extreme case. But global migration is an ever growing phenomenon within the modern world. If Filipina mothers justify the prolongation of their migration partly on the basis that mobile phones allow them to retain their role as mothers, then we have to start thinking of this use of the phone as potentially cause as well as effect of migration and development. In either case, when assessing the consequences of mobile phones, this role within separated families would seem to be of particular significance.

References (incomplete)

Acacio, K. (2008) 'Managing labor migration: Philippine state policy and intenational migration flows, 1969-2000'. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 17: 103-132

Asis, M. M. B. (2008) 'The Philippines'. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*. Vol. 17, no. 3-4: 349-378.

Asis, M. M. B. (2005). 'Caring for the World: Filipino Domestic Workers Gone Global'. In *Asian Women as Transnational Domestic Workers*. Edited by Shirlena Huang, Brenda Yeoh and Noor Abdul Rahman. Singapore: Marshall and Cavendish Academic. Pp 21-53.

Caglar, A. (1995) German Turks in Berlin: Social exclusion and Strategies for Social Mobility. *New Community* 21(3): 309-323

Castells, M., et als. Eds (2006) *Mobile Communication and Society: a global perspective*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Constable, N. (1999) 'At Home but Not at Home: Filipina Narratives of Ambivalent Returns'. *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May, 1999), pp. 203-228

Dreby, J. (2006) 'Honor And Virtue: Mexican Parenting In The Transnational Context'. *Gender and Society*. Vol. 20 No. 1, 32-59

Fortunati, L. (2002) 'Italy: stereotypes, true and false'. In Katz, J. and E. Aakhus eds., *Perpetual contact: mobile communication, private talk, public performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fresnoza-Flot, A. (2009) 'Migration status and transnational mothering: the case of Filipino migrants in France'. *Global Networks* 9, 2: 252–270

Hochschild, A. (2000), 'Global care chains and emotional surplus value', in Hutton, W. and Giddens, A. (Eds.), *On The Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, London: Jonathan Cape.

Hondagneu- Sotelo, P. and Avila, E. (1997) "I'm Here, but I'm There": The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood. *Gender and Society*, 11(5) 538-71.

Horst, H. A. and Miller, D. (2006) *The Cell Phone: an anthropology of communication*. Oxford: Berg.

Lamvik, G. (2002). The Filipino Seafarer: A Life between Sacrifice and Shopping. Trondheim, Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Unpublished Dr. Art.

McKay, D. (2007) 'Sending Dollars Shows Feeling': Emotions and Economies in Filipino Migration. *Mobilities*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 175–194

Miller, D. (2007) 'What is a relationship: kinship as negotiated experience'. *Ethnos* 72: 535-54

Miller, D. (2009) What is a mobile phone relationship? In E. Alampay Ed. *Living the Information Society in Asia* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 24-35

Miller, D. and Madianou, M. (forthcoming) Should you accept a *friends* request from your mother? And other Filipino dilemmas.

Parreñas, R. S. (2001) Mothering from a Distance: Emotions, Gender, and Intergenerational Relations in Filipino Transnational Families. *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 27 (2): 361-390

Parreñas, R. S. (2001) *Servants of Globalization, Women, Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Parreñas, R. S. (2005a) *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Parreñas, R. (2005b) 'Long distance intimacy: class, gender and intergenerational relations between mothers and children in Filipino transnational families'. *Global Networks* 5 (4): 317–336

Pertierra, R. et. als. (2002) *Txting selves*: *Cellphones and Phillipine Modernity*. Manila: De La Salle University Press.

Pingol, A. (2001) *Remaking Masculinities*. Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.

National Statistical Coordination Board (2007) *Philippine Statistical Yearbook*. Manila. NSO

POEA (2009) 2007 Overseas Employment Statistics. http://www.poea.gov.ph/stats/stats2007.pdf Last accessed on 14 July 2009.

Rafael, V. L. (2003) 'The Cell Phone and the Crowd: Messianic Politics in the Contemporary Philippines'. *Public Culture*, Vol. 15 (3): 399-425

Suarez-Orozco, C., Todorova, I. and Louie, J.(2005). 'Making up for lost time: the experience of separation and reunification among immigrant families'. In *The New Immigration*, Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo et. als. Eds. New York: Routledge, pp. 179-196.

Yeates, N 2004 Global Care Chains. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1468-4470, Volume 6, Issue 3, Pages 369 – 391

Widding Isaksen, Lise, Sambasivan Uma Devi and Arlie Russell Hochschild (2008) Global Care Crisis: A Problem of Capital, Care Chain, or Commons? *American Behavioral Scientist*; 52; 405-425