

Mobile Phone Parenting: reconfiguring relationships between Filipina mothers and their children in the Philippines.¹

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Abstract

The Philippines is an intensely migrant society with an annual migration of one million people, leading to over a tenth of the population working abroad. Many of these emigrants are mothers who often have children left-behind. Family separation is now recognised as one of the social costs of migration affecting the global south. Relationships within such transnational families depend on long-distance communication and there is an increasing optimism among Filipino government agencies and telecommunications companies about the consequences of mobile phones for transnational families. This paper draws on comparative research with UK-based Filipina migrants – mainly domestic workers and nurses – and their left-behind children in the Philippines. Additionally, whilst in the Philippines, we also interviewed other left-behind children as well as officials from government agencies, NGOs and telecommunications companies. Our methodology allowed us to directly compare the experience of mothers and their children. The paper concludes that while mothers feel empowered that the phone has allowed them to partially reconstruct their role as parents, and may even use this to justify remaining in the UK, their children are significantly more ambivalent about the consequences of transnational communication. For those children who report more positively on the capacity of mobile phones to facilitate long-distance relationships with their parents, two parameters appear to be significant: the age of the children at the time of their mother's migration and the uninterrupted and frequent communication made possible after the mobile phone explosion.

Keywords: mobile phones, migration, transnational families, parenting, separation, Philippines, UK, ethnography.

‘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 has an established place in the literature both through the millions of SMSs sent each day, which have led to the Philippines being described as the texting capital of the world, and through the political upheaval of EDSA II in 2001 when it is claimed that mobile phones facilitated the coordination of vast street protests, which led to the ousting of the then President Estrada, and the subsequent elevation of the mobile phone as a symbol of people's power (Castells, 2008; Pertierra, 2002; Rafael, 2003).

The trend towards large-scale and state-sponsored labour migration began with the 1970s demand for foreign workers that followed the Middle-Eastern oil boom. 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’ (Asis, 2005: 27). Today over 10 per cent of the population are working abroad and more than a million new emigrants – the majority of them women – leave 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 are matters 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 (Paragas, 2009; Parreñas, 2005a) as our introductory illustration, taken from a government-sponsored seminar, mandatory for all emigrants, suggests.

This paper is concerned to assess the impact of mobile communications on transnational family relationships, especially those between mothers and children. This is a comparative ethnographic study, which has followed developments in transnational families during a two and a half year period. The first phase of research was a year-long (2007-8) London- and Cambridge-based ethnography with Filipina domestic workers and nurses, most of whom came to the UK after periods in the Middle East, or Hong Kong. Most of these women are mothers separated from their children throughout their children’s development. In total, we interviewed 52 participants during this first phase. We subsequently spent the winter of 2008-09 in the Philippines interviewing the children of these mothers, as well as other left-behind children in four provinces around Metropolitan Manila. All children participants were over 17 years old at the time of the interviews. In total, 53 participants were interviewed in this phase of the research while the combined sample contains 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. Finally, throughout 2009 and early 2010 we re-interviewed and maintained contact with 12 of the original participants.

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, such as from telecoms statistics suggests a much higher figure for irregulars, bringing the total to around 12 million.² About half of these migrants are deployed on fixed-term contracts that require renewal, which together with other restrictions explain why it is difficult for women to be joined by their families.³ By 2006, following aggressive government marketing (Asis, 2005: 34), annual deployment was in excess of one million per annum (POEA, 2008; Asis, 2008). Lauded since the time of Marcos as ‘heros and heroines’ of the economy, (Asis, 2005: 27), emigrants remitted \$14.5 billion in 2007 (Asis, 2008), creating increasing economic dependence upon migration, which has become formal state economic strategy (Acacio, 2008; Asis, 2008).

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. Again data from telecommunications companies based on incoming/outgoing traffic suggest this estimate is conservative. This population consists primarily of domestic workers, caregivers and nurses following systematic recruitment by the British National Health Service (NHS) from the late 1990s to mid 2000s. Since the NHS stopped recruiting there has been an increase in Filipinas who come to the UK on student visas (thus not appearing in official statistics), but who are also employed as caregivers, working up to 20 hours a week in private nursing homes.

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) and Sri Lanka (Widding Isaksen et als, 2008). Widding Isaksen et als (2008) argue this ‘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 implies that a woman who migrates to look after children in the UK, may use her wages to employ someone to care for her children in Manila, who may in turn have her children looked after by another woman in the rural Philippines. These ‘care chains’ are seen as reinforcing uneven development globally, extracting care labour as ‘emotional surplus value’ from developing countries developed countries’ children getting ‘surplus love’ (Hochschild, 2000: 136). Although the ‘care chains’ approach was intended as a response to the limitations of ‘market-derived concepts’ (Widding Isaksen *et als*, 2008: 419-20), it still employs 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 (Miller, 2007, 2009) under the circumstances of radical deterritorialisation.

Several previous studies have explored the consequences of separation for Filipino families (Asis, 2008; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; McKay, 2007; Paragas, 2009; Parreñas, 2005a and b). Parreñas has focused specifically on the problem of left-behind children comparing those with fathers or mothers abroad (2005b) and what she sees as the persistence of traditional gender expectations, concluding that, despite female migration, ‘the ideology of women’s domesticity remains intact in the Philippines’ (Parreñas 2005b: 168). Fresnoza-Flot (2009: 266) confirms that for Filipinas in France, motherhood

becomes emphasised in migration, while Pingol (2001), based on her research in Ilocos Norte in the Northern Philippines suggests 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 similar argument on Ecuador, see Pribilsky, 2004). 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. Parreñas has argued that mobile phone communication has contributed to the persistence of gender inequalities, by creating the expectation that mothers will perform caring roles and emotional work from a distance (Parreñas, 2005a) echoing findings regarding phones and the gendered reproduction of domestic labour in the US (see Rakow and Navarro, 1993; Chesley, 2005). However, we argue that the role of mobile phones in transnational parenting requires detailed and systematic investigation especially given the degree to which such relationships depend on communication since visits are often infrequent due to the cost of travel, or, in the case of undocumented migrants, legal restrictions.

The mobile phone explosion

The Philippines resembles other developing countries in the dominance of mobile phones and scarcity of landlines, which initially also entailed low internet adoption rates (although, recently, mobile internet, albeit still expensive, is beginning to make inroads especially among middle class users). In 2006, there were 42,868,911 mobile phone subscribers out of a population of approximately 88.5 million (National Statistical Coordination Board, 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 (National Statistical Coordination Board, 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).

Several of our informants migrated during a period dominated by letters and occasional cassette tapes. Phone calls were rare and expensive. By contrast, mobile phones today form part of a communication ecology with multiple platforms including Yahoo Messenger, Skype, Webcam, email and social networking sites dominated by Friendster and Facebook. Within this, it was the rise of mobile phones together with international calling cards that opened up the possibilities for instant and frequent communication (Vertovec, 2004).

The pronounced optimism within at least some government bodies with regard to the potential of mobile phones for alleviating the social costs of migration was evident in our opening quotation from one of the mandatory pre-departure orientation seminars (PDOS) intended to prepare migrants for life abroad. Seminars like these are organised by the relevant state authorities, the POEA and OWWA (Overseas Workers' Welfare Administration). Interestingly, both organisations' regular commercial sponsor is Globe, one of the two dominant mobile phone corporations, which also sponsors the 'Model OFW Family of the Year Award', a competition that recognises a financially successful migrant family whose members maintain close family ties despite separation.

The Mothers' Perspective

Before the mobile phone explosion voice communication between mothers and left-behind children was rare and expensive. Several 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 their 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 were: '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'. Barbara had to get an extra part-time job 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 the family would be at home.

The possession of mobile phones by migrant mothers represented a true catalyst for new developments in family communication. International calling cards were almost universally employed for making international calls through mobile phones. 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 the most conspicuous being 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 (see also Parreñas 2005a). 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 numbers⁴ this remains a considerable sum for low-income families. At least they improve upon the situation recalled by Nina when her daughter in the late 1990s spent more than 8,000 pesos⁵ for one hour's phone call on her mobile (more than the average Filipino monthly salary). So, while a mother can call her children whenever she feels she needs to hear

their voice and express her feelings, they cannot afford to do the same. Interviews with officials from the major mobile phone networks reported a ratio of seven minutes inbound for every one minute outbound from the Philippines.

Those in the Philippines can, however, use texts or missed-calls⁶ to at least signal to their mothers that they need to speak and should be phoned back. Almost all the mothers we spoke to had a second mobile phone with a Filipino roaming SIM card essentially to receive these SMS's at the local Philippine rate of one peso, compared to 20 pesos for an SMS to a UK mobile number. These asymmetries can, however, 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!"'

Communication via SMS is often phatic: it is the act of communication rather than its content that affirms the relationship (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005). Texts also arrive on special occasions such as birthdays, religious holidays and mother's day. Young children and teenagers' texting may be dominated by requests for money or specific items. Although our participants invariably respond to such demands there may also experience them as intrusive, or inappropriately demanding, especially when they are sent by more distant relatives or acquaintances. Bilateral kinship systems tend to proliferate the number of relatives who may feel they have rights to such requests (Madianou and Miller, in preparation). Texts may also function to facilitate coordination in sending and receiving remittances, or to arrange communication through other media. For example, Nora will text her son Fernando and his family: 'get your webcam ready, I'm waiting for you on YM (Yahoo Messenger)'.

Mothers receive texts on roaming phones, but reply by calling or texting from their cheaper UK registered numbers. The roaming phone is always on, as a conduit for the receipt of family texts, topped up once a month to prevent the subscription expiring. Although replies are dominated by voice calls, texts suit certain circumstances. Angela

has asked her sister who looks after her daughter to text her when Florencia is late from a night out and generally texts her sister for factual questions. But the preference is for voice calls which mothers claim enables conversation and deliberation impossible in a 160-character text. 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. '[It's like] hugging them', she added.

Cheap mobile phone calls have created a platform for intensive mothering from a distance. Judy 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. Judy 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. Nelia and Greta spend even more, at times 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 time they have left. Many participants here as elsewhere (Fortunati, 2002; Horst and Miller, 2006; Law and Peng, 2006), see their mobile phones as 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 phone which means she can afford longer conversations. She would prefer to use SKYPE pc-to-pc which is free, but the family home in Bulacan still has no landline or internet. Wireless internet is prohibitively expensive by local standards and not an option for most of our participants. Greta also calls her children before she goes to bed (around 10pm GMT) in order to wake them up for school (6 AM in the Philippines). As a trained teacher she helps them with their

homework. She always knows what they are having for dinner and often advises their grandmother (*lola*) who cares for them in her absence. Greta left in 2002 during the mobile phone boom and has always maintained constant contact with her children. Nelia 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. Such a level of detailed knowledge of their children's daily lives would have been inconceivable in the pre-mobile phone period when communication was either infrequent or too expensive. Crucially, mobile phones also facilitate the mothers' involvement in their children's lives and even the micromanaging of their households which would have been impossible via the older platforms of letters, or the occasional phone call.

These findings confirm to an extent Parreñas' observations that women, despite their physical absence, still attempt to perform all parenting and emotional work from a distance as opposed to the physically present fathers who are conspicuously less involved (Parreñas 2005a, see also Chesley, 2005 and Rakow and Navarro, 1993 for similar findings in the US context). Very few fathers in our research were, or had been as directly involved in the parenting of these children. Although we agree with Parreñas' (2005a) observations about the imbalanced division of domestic labour, our findings suggest that the consequences of mobile phones are more complex and nuanced.

This extreme dependence upon mediated communication in a situation of extended absence, punctuated by infrequent return visits (often because of legal impediments) explains why several of our participants, including Greta and Nelia, 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 this decision as to 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 their migration. This may be for the furtherance of economic and symbolic capital (Caglar, 1995), self improvement

and to gain respect. There may remain incessant demands from wider networks of relatives and friends which they can never fulfil. Another factor may be increasing ambivalence about the Philippines compared to their new country of residence (Constable, 1999). 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 experienced a period when communication infrequent and expensive and those who left the Philippines more recently and have always been able to maintain frequent communication. The latter call more frequently, possibly because their children are younger, but also because improvements in mobile technology and pricing have raised the expectations for more frequent communication. Other significant distinctions are between documented and undocumented migrants who cannot visit their children as frequently. In the UK there is also a contrast between nurses and domestic workers, the former usually coming from more middle class and urban backgrounds. Their families are 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 as wide a range of experiences amongst the children as amongst the mothers. But if, in general, mothers see new media as to some degree enabling them to reconstitute their role as mothers and thereby ameliorating their situation of absence, the children's assessment of transnational communication seems to be divided into two broad patterns. Although several children were largely positive about the fact that they could keep in touch with their mothers, as many were very critical about their mothers' ability to successfully reconstitute their role. Grace discusses this explicitly. In reflecting upon the improvement in communication she 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, or the other carers who look 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 [my mother] 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.’ (Grace)

An even more extreme case is Bea who clearly felt that the improvement in communication is more to satisfy the mother that she is now a parent again than any actual benefit to the child. When asked how often her mother phoned she said:

‘once every two weeks. Or, every time 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 nanny [*yaya*] who was employed to look after the children.

Mothers would often have a particular time of the week when they would phone and 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 more interesting things to do. One of the most common signs of this failure of parenting are stories the children tell about how, while their mother was trying to be present, they behaved as if they were unaware of 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 [when] I was a High School teacher,[...] 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.' This became evident to the children through the things parents sent back as presents. Often toys, even teddy bears, clearly suited to children some years younger than their actual age, which demonstrated that being in constant contact did not mean parents actually had a better understanding of who their children were.

In those cases where mothers use the phone to make constant calls this could be seen as quite intrusive. As Ricardo 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, Bea 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.' [...] 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 previously noted asymmetry in communication can also be resented by children. Lisa 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. Lisa instead turned more to email as this gives her the space in which to expand her thoughts and feelings. She also found the constraint of calls based around calling cards 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'.

What all the above participants have in common is that their mothers migrated at a time when they were still young (under 10 years old). That had also been a time when transnational communication was still expensive and infrequent. While we have a few examples when adult children managed to forge close relationships with their mothers through mediated communication after years of living apart, most often it seems that if a gap has occurred at a formative age this is difficult to overcome even when opportunities for communication increase. Conversely, most of those who report positively on the way that mobile phones and other ICTs facilitate their relationships, were usually older when their mothers left which was usually after the mobile phone boom. So this group never

experienced a period of scarce communication. Moreover, because of the expectation of frequent communication, these families seemed to be prepared to face the higher costs of telephone bills. This was the case of Cecilia who actually found that her mother was a more ‘active mother’ after she migrated. 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, or access to a mobile signal. During her first year abroad her 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 and was hardly ever at home. 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’. 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’. Bea 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’.

Conclusions

This article began by observing the enthusiasm surrounding the potential of mobile phones for addressing the social costs of migration and most notably the separation between mothers and children. An enthusiasm shared in the Philippines by both the

telecommunications industry itself, which – albeit with some delay – is now targeting the OFW market, and the government migration agencies and regulatory bodies who regard migration as part of state economic policy. By contrast, we have tried to assess the consequences for those actually experiencing separation, that is mothers and left-behind children.

The advent of mobile phones has significantly improved the ability of mothers to parent at a distance. Those most positively affected those who came from rural or low-income areas, whose families rarely had access to landlines or the internet. The mere fact that they could now call in an emergency, or simply be able to coordinate transfers of money and gifts, as well as express care was clearly of considerable benefit. It is hardly surprising that almost all UK participants, that is the mothers, felt much happier to the degree they believed they could now fulfil their parental obligations and to reconstitute themselves as mothers. Voice communication was central to the possibility of emotional fulfilment, while the phone's storage capacity enabled them to retain texts and pictures which they reviewed again and again. Mobile phone communication allows mothers to deal with the ambivalence that is deeply ingrained in their decision to migrate. It may even contribute to decisions regarding the prolongation of migration in the UK, which women can justify more easily to the extent that they believe phones allow them to become effective transnational parents.

What we have tried to show, however, is that this improvement in communications is not an unalloyed blessing. Firstly, transnational communication involves asymmetries, the most poignant one being that children on the whole cannot afford to call their mothers (although they can text or make a missed-call to signal their wish to initiate communication). The ratio of inbound/outbound minutes is 7:1. There are also differences in experience between mothers who left before and after the mobile phone explosion, and never experienced the same gap in communication. This shows that current experiences remain closely tied to the previous histories of both the media and the relationships.

One of our most important findings is the marked discrepancy between the accounts of the mothers and their children, which is a direct consequence of our comparative, transnational methodology. The mothers use the phone to become involved in everyday parenting and micromanaging of their children's meals, homework and disciplinary issues. They view this performance of mothering as empowering and as evidence of the phone's ability to reconstitute their role as effective parents. Their children, by contrast, are much more ambivalent about the consequences of transnational communication. The children's sample is divided between two broad narratives: those who report negatively on the ability of mobile phones to facilitate a meaningful relationship with their mothers and those who are more positive. The former group consists of children whose mothers left prior to the mobile phone explosion when they were still young. Conversely, the latter group are children whose mothers left when they were older, which, in most cases coincides with the period when communication via mobile phone was the expectation. It seems that for those who experienced a gap in communication at a formative age found it harder to re-constitute the relationship when communicative opportunities proliferated with the arrival of mobile phones. Conversely, those for whom communication was almost taken for granted seemed to be more content – although at times still ambivalent – with the ability of mobile phones and other platforms to facilitate long-distance relationships with their parents. In some cases children may feel that mothers have become more open and more engaged than they ever were when they lived together in the same household.

Ambivalence is evident when both sides use the different capacities of the mobile phone to try and control their end of the relationship. The ability of voice to more effectively convey emotion than text may be something to seize upon, or to avoid, depending on their goals with regard to this relationship. In some respects this ambivalence exacerbates that often documented for co-present parenting, which can also be extreme even when the entire family migrates from the Philippines (see Wolf, 1997).

Such findings should make us cautious about simply accepting normative models with regard either to the relationships or to mobile phones, which as instruments of mediation

lead 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 mobile phone as potentially both a consequence, but also as a cause of migration and globalisation.

Notes

¹ The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the ESRC in funding the study 'Migration, ICTs and the Transformation of Transnational Family Life' (RES-000-22-2266) and British Telecom for the funding of interview transcriptions. We wish to thank our research participants, who must remain anonymous, and Jonathan Ong for research assistantship in the Philippines during December 2008 – February 2009.

² Based on our interviews with representatives from mobile companies.

³ The Philippine government has bilateral agreements with receiving countries (for example, several within the Middle East) to provide overseas workers on limited-time contracts.

⁴ Calls to mobile phones are more costly. Duration of call varies according to destination country with the US-bound calls representing the best value. 100 pesos is approximately £1.4

⁵ Approximately £114.

⁶ A missed call is when the caller hangs up as soon as they can see the call has gone through, so the recipient is aware they have called, but no expense incurred.

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