

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth,  
and Family Studies

Child, Youth, and Family Studies, Department of

---

2018

# Fictive Kinships and the Remaking of Family Life in the Context of Paid Domestic Work: The Case of Philippine *Yayas*

Maria Rosario de Guzman

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [mguzman2@unl.edu](mailto:mguzman2@unl.edu)

Aileen S. Garcia

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [aileen.garcia@sdstate.edu](mailto:aileen.garcia@sdstate.edu)

Minerva D. Tuliao

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [mtuliao2@unl.edu](mailto:mtuliao2@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/famconfacpub>

Part of the [Developmental Psychology Commons](#), [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Other Psychology Commons](#), and the [Other Sociology Commons](#)

---

de Guzman, Maria Rosario; Garcia, Aileen S.; and Tuliao, Minerva D., "Fictive Kinships and the Remaking of Family Life in the Context of Paid Domestic Work: The Case of Philippine *Yayas*" (2018). *Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*. 221.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/famconfacpub/221>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Child, Youth, and Family Studies, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# **Fictive Kinships and the Remaking of Family Life in the Context of Paid Domestic Work: The Case of Philippine *Yayas***

Maria Rosario T. de Guzman,<sup>1</sup> Aileen S. Garcia,<sup>2</sup>  
and Minerva D. Tuliao<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Nebraska–Lincoln

<sup>2</sup> South Dakota State University

<sup>3</sup> Texas Tech University

Consider this picture of family life we observed during our fieldwork in Quezon City, Philippines. The focus of our study was on *yayas*—women employed as domestic care workers whose primary job was to take care of children in private homes. Our participants were themselves mothers who had left their children in their rural communities while they lived and worked in the city.

On one early morning, we observed a group having a shared breakfast of fish, rice, and vegetables. In this rather intimate and idyllic family scene, there was lively banter, laughter, chiding, sharing of stories and talk of mundane issues about children, work, and plans for the rest of the day. Although there was no table, the group of seven was seated in two rows facing each other—holding plates on their laps and eating with their hands. There is nothing unusual about this

---

Published in *Parenting from Afar and the Reconfiguration of Family Across Distance*, ed. Maria Rosario T. de Guzman, Jill Brown, and Carolyn Pope Edwards (New York: Oxford, 2018), pp. 72-89.

Copyright © 2018 Oxford University Press. Used by permission

event, and it was likely repeated in many households around the country that same morning. There was nothing extraordinary about the food, the scene, nor the topics of conversation except for one thing: this meal was not occurring under the roof of a house but inside the school service jeep parked outside the Little Tykes preschool in an affluent gated community in Quezon City. The driver of this school bus service is known as Kuya Jun (note: *Kuya* is a kinship term that literally means “older brother” but is also a term used for men of higher status). He is also the owner of the vehicle, and he is charged with bringing children and their *yayas* from their homes to and from the preschool daily. In addition to Kuya Jun, partaking in this shared meal were the *yayas* whose young wards were attending the preschool that morning. The day before this observation, we had noted that there was a small makeshift cabinet bolted onto the floor of the school bus, and this is where the *yayas* and Kuya Jun kept the plastic plates for this morning ritual.

We chose to start this chapter with a scenario to illustrate the sense of closeness and participation in reconstructed family life that migrants experience and build in their host communities. As many chapters in this volume illustrate, one of the biggest sacrifices made by laborers who relocate to take on jobs is separation from family. A rich body of work describes how economic migrants bridge physical distance and maintain family connections, for instance, by adopting alternative caregiving strategies (e.g., remittances) in lieu of in-person care (Krzyowski & Mucha, 2014; Ingersoll-Dayton, Punpuing, Tangchonlatip, & Yakas, Chapter 2 in this volume) and using mediated communication and social media to connect with family (Baldassar, Baldock, & Wilding, 2007; Madianou & Miller, 2011). However, maintaining family life can also occur in the immediate settings that migrants occupy within their receiving communities. In fact, for migrants, building close social ties and even fictive kinships is essential to adapting to their new home communities (de Guzman & Garcia, 2017). It is this type of family rebuilding—one that is established in the host community and away from biological ties—that we examine in this chapter.

In this chapter, we draw from our study on Filipina rural-to-urban migrant workers in the domestic care sector to illustrate how

migrants make and remake family in the context of separation. The setting of our study is in Quezon City, Philippines, and our participants are women employed as *yayas-domestic* care workers employed to care for children. They live in their employers' homes, and most of our respondents live apart from their own children and all are living away from their nuclear families. Details of this study are laid out in an earlier paper that focused on the experience of family separation for domestic care workers and strategies they utilized to reconfigure and maintain relationships across physical distance (de Guzman, 2014). Here, we reexamine our data with a lens toward understanding how they rebuild new family life in their immediate contexts. We explore the nature of those relationships and how they reflect deeply embedded notions of family life (e.g., family roles) and implications for coping and wellbeing given the challenges of migration and domestic care work.<sup>1</sup>

### **Domestic Care Workers: A Snapshot**

Domestic workers are those individuals employed to work in or for private households to perform a range of services related to maintaining the home (e.g., housekeeping, gardening) or caring for individuals (e.g., children, elderly) (International Labour Organization, 2011; Domestic Workers Act of 2012, Republic Act 10361). Worldwide, there are 52 million domestic workers, most of whom are women, migrants, and members of other historically disadvantaged groups (International Labour Organization, 2013). Domestic work is a rapidly growing and important labor sector. Although paid domestic work accounts for only 2% of jobs worldwide, domestic workers and care workers take on duties that free their employers to enter or reenter the workforce or otherwise maintain a better quality of living (Chen, 2011; Luebker, 2013). Because domestic workers and domestic care workers are often employed to carry out tasks most typically undertaken by women (Boris & Parreñas, 2010), the availability of paid domestic work can have important implications for the reentry of women into the workforce to take on more highly skilled jobs. Nevertheless, paid domestic

1. Interviews were conducted in Filipino, transcribed and analyzed in the original language. Quotes presented here were translated from the original transcripts.

work remains one of the most undervalued labor sectors, typically netting meager wages with inadequate workplace protections. The nature of work is carried out in private households and is largely informal, making workers less visible and more vulnerable to abuse (Chen, 2011; International Labour Organization, 2011).

Domestic work, migration, and family dispersal are all intertwined. There are no reliable figures on how many domestic workers live apart from their families; nonetheless, many domestic workers worldwide are migrants from less economically prosperous nations or from poorer regions within the same country. In the Philippines, there are 2 million domestic workers, more than 84% of whom are women, and most are employed in highly urbanized regions (e.g. Manila, Davao) but migrate from rural provinces. For example, 40% of domestic workers are working in the National Capital Region alone, and 30% of those workers report having migrated from outside provinces. Half of all domestic workers in the Philippines are married, and 40% are below the age of 35. Domestic workers in the Philippines are generally young, of childbearing age, with most experiencing extended periods of family separation in pursuit of work.

Although the challenges of family life for international economic migrants have been highlighted in recent literature (e.g., see volume by Baldassar & Merla, 2014), implications of domestic migration on family life have been relatively neglected. This gap in research is important to address because relocation within national borders occurs at a much higher frequency, and rural-to-urban migrants tend to be more disadvantaged than their transnational peers (Laczko, 2008). Domestic migrants tend to have lower levels of educational attainment, hail from regions with higher rates of rural poverty, and have fewer years of work experience (International Labour Organization, 2013).

### **Keeping Ties Unless You Can't: The Challenges of Maintaining Family Across Distance**

Migrants vary across such domains as geographic origin and destination, religious affiliation, socioeconomic levels, migration status, and, consequently, in levels of economic and social capital and access to resources (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Disparities in access to

typical tools for maintaining family life are reflected in migrants' abilities to bridge distance and maintain ties to their nuclear and extended family, as was evident in the experiences of our respondents. For instance, remitting money and gifts is a common way by which migrants continue to provide care, fulfill obligations, and show attachment to members of family from whom they are living apart (Bocagni, 2012; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009). However, the frequency and size of remittances vary as a function of migrants' length of tenure in their host community, intention to return home, skill level, migration status, and income disparity between natal and host country (Schiopu & Siegfried, 2006; Waldinger, 2007). Reciprocal visits, which provide temporary reunification that enables migrants to maintain presence and visibility in their home community and in physically participating in meaningful life events of family members (Mason, 2004) can be largely determined by financial ability to afford the cost of travel and, for transnationals, their migration status (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; King, Cela, Fokkema, & Vullnetari, 2014). Finally, there has been much recent scholarly attention on the impacts of mobile and communicative technology on migrants' abilities to maintain contact with family. Given the ubiquity of synchronous and instant communication tools (e.g., texts, social media), migrants' experiences of absence are now said to be limited to physical separation because families can develop "co-presence" and maintain cohesion across distance (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Madianaou and Miller (2011) coined the term "poly-media" to refer to an ecology where there is not only availability but also diversity in various technologies for communication, such that the task for migrants is no longer finding access to communication but instead choosing the appropriate and preferred technologies for specific purposes (e.g., delivering news vs. sharing intimate stories) and relationships.

For migrants in our study, access to the three most typical tools for maintaining family life across distance was limited. The use of cell phones was constrained by the relatively high cost of purchasing usage minutes and, for some, their inability to purchase cell phone units for family in rural villages. Because of the high cost of transportation relative to their income and the long commute times, our participants reported that reciprocal visits were infrequent and short at best. Connecting via remittances and sending care packages was similarly done but also much limited compared to the transnational

Filipino experience of sending large packages (i.e., *balikbayan* boxes) filled with goods that not only provide for basic needs but also communicate care (McCay, 2016). Although participants reported remitting practically their entire salaries for the care of their children, these amounts were often just enough to cover basic needs.

Additionally, respondents reported barriers that stemmed from issues not directly tied to material resources. For mothers whose children were too young to engage in meaningful conversation or exchange texts, our respondents reported that phone calls did not do much to promote a sense of connection or communication. “They put the phone near the baby and she just listens to my voice;” one mother recounted. Without regular physical and face-to-face contact, our respondents did not feel that they could connect with their young infants and toddlers who then were growing up without a sense of connection to their mothers. Others found phone calls to simply serve as reminders of the toll that separation was taking on their relationships with their children. “It is painful to call ... I hear her calling my own mother ‘*nanay*’ [i.e., mother] ... she calls her father ‘*tatay*’ [father] and her grandmother ‘*nanay*:” one noted in describing her hesitance in calling her daughter.

Moreover, in many cases, alternative caregivers (e.g., migrants’ siblings, mothers-in-law) exerted high levels of control over migrants’ access to their own children, sometimes blocking communication to retaliate over arguments or as a means of control to solicit favors or additional funds. Sometimes, various family members with more direct access to the children or who could mediate between the migrant and the caregivers were able to control information that affected their ability to reach their children. Sheila (age 27) describes a complicated situation with her estranged husband whose mother (i.e., Sheila’s mother-in-law) was caring for her child in a rural province while Sheila was working in Manila:

I came home to visit my son recently and my mother-in-law acted angry. She goes, “why are you here?” So I asked my ex-husband, “what did you tell her?” And he said nothing. I said, “maybe you turned the situation upside down.” Maybe he told her that I left him when in fact he left me for another woman and I didn’t choose that. I just had to accept that he left. And I send money every month (through the ex-husband). It is

for the care of our child but I don't think he gives it all to her (mother-in-law). He feeds himself with it.

Similarly, Ime (41 years old) sometimes considers leaving work all together to be with her daughter but notes that her mother-in-law simply "doesn't want to return" her daughter. Given more than 10 years of being the primary caregiver, her mother-in-law had grown very attached to her daughter, and Ime suspects that she does not tell her daughter that it is she who sends money for her daughter's care. Moreover, her mother-in-law has complete control over information about her daughter and the amount of long-distance contact they can have. She notes,

She [mother-in-law] only remembers to call me when she [daughter] is sick. Sometimes they'll call me and say, "your daughter is sick, she has a fever, we don't have money, we need money." Just like that. It makes me think, when they need something, they call me.

Thus, migrants in our study had meager financial resources and were often at the mercy of those providing care for their children (e.g., mothers-in-law, siblings). Over time, many lost the ability to meaningfully connect with their children. Several participants noted that maintaining family life involved providing for the basic care of their children and not actual presence or connection. As one of our participants poignantly noted, the experience of being a mother from a distance as a *yaya* meant only that they gave birth to a child and not more. Migrants in our study were not participants in the more interconnected world more often highlighted in the literature on transnational family life and do not have the means to maintain "co-presence" with family that higher resource migrants are increasingly achieving today (Baldassar & Merla, 2014).

### **The Need to Rebuild Family Right Here and Right Now**

Given the centrality of family in traditional Filipino society and the traditional caregiving role that mothers play in caring for their children (Alampay, 2014), separation from family resulted in severe



emotional burdens for our respondents. Because the desire to be with biological kin was constrained, the business of “family life” was then fulfilled in the very context of their paid domestic work and by connecting with peers in the neighborhoods in which they worked. Our respondents built tight and close connections within their new communities in ways that mimicked family life both in intimacy and structure. Consistent with findings of other scholars, the building of fictive kinships in the context of migration was an important form of coping, self-care, and as a means of establishing social capital in a situation where they otherwise would have had very limited resources (e.g., Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Cox & Narula, 2003; Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Kim, 2009).

### ***Family Life With Peers***

Away from their families, migrants often seek a sense of family and build close connections in their places and communities of work (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Kim, 2009). For instance, Filipino mothers working as domestic helpers in Singapore report trying to cope with family separation by regarding non-kin relations in their new places of work as family (Asis, Huang, & Yeoh, 2004). Somewhat similarly, McCay (2016) describes how Filipino migrants in London seek the company of co-ethnics to provide them with a sense of closeness and belonging as a form of self-care and coping that they deemed necessary to deal with the physically and emotionally demanding tasks of domestic care work. Consistent with those studies, our respondents formed close relations with peers in their neighborhoods who were also in paid domestic employment, such as other *yayas*, housekeepers, and drivers. As we illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, domestic care workers in our study built family life among other workers in their communities, developing close ties and even recreating everyday family rituals in modified ways to literally fit the physical spaces they occupied. In the afternoons at the local park within our study site, it was not uncommon to see *yayas* having *merienda* (a light afternoon meal) together as their wards played. Outside the local preschool, the *yayas* and drivers spent time together while waiting for their wards who attended 3-4 hours of instruction-passing

time by sharing meals, gossiping, and sharing in banter and talk that similarly reflected closeness and familiarity. Our field notes outside the local daycare captured this sense of closeness that was easily discernable from observations:

Nannies typically congregate outside while the children are in school. Some nannies said that they don't really live nearby so they have to stay here and wait for their wards, while others do live nearby but opt to stay anyway. Some nannies joke, "*nakakalabas lang pag pumasok*" (we can only go out when the kids go to school). At 10:30 AM, approximately six nannies and three males (one is the school bus driver, one is a private car driver, one other is unknown) are gathered outside and appear to be very familiar with each other. When I approached to talk about the study, they knew immediately who among them had children and encouraged each other to participate. They were kind enough to let us use the school bus in which several of them were sitting earlier, to use for the interview. They said it would be better for privacy and to keep away from the hot sun.

*Yayas* described these close and fictive kinships as another "consolation prize" and a sense of family in lieu of their own kinfolk who were many miles away. And, just like family, the ties are close and deeply embedded. Individuals spend time together whenever possible, they share intimate information and seek each others' countenance, and they report being able to relate to each others' plight given their shared experience. In December, the *yayas* told us of their plans for an out-of-town holiday trip—a rendezvous that was to be made possible because Kuya Jun volunteered both the use of his jeep and his services to drive for the group. Due to what turned out to be a high cost for the trip (e.g., cost of gasoline, food, and lodging) and several of the *yayas* being called upon by their employers to work during the holidays, they were unable to carry through with their plans. Nonetheless, several *yayas* mentioned that they remained cautiously hopeful to have at least this one dream of a family trip fulfilled some day; nonetheless, others said that they suspected that this plan for an out-of-town trip together would "remain a dream."

### ***Cultural Context Reflected in Family Life With Peers***

That cultural context shapes family life is well acknowledged and supported in the scholarly literature. A rich body of research has documented systematic cross-cultural differences in such aspects of family life as parental beliefs, expectations and socialization goals (e.g., Keller et al., 2006), family configuration and household patterns (Therborn, 2009), and everyday settings of children and family members (Weisner, 2014). Less has been written about how cultural context informs the formation of fictive kinships and how social structures and roles therein reflect cultural notions of family life. In the case of *yayas'* reconstructed family life with peers, at least two characteristics of Filipino family life are evident. First, the Filipino family is characterized by the extended nature of its membership, with the extension of family descending both bilaterally and through the *compadrazgo* system, where relations are established through close friendship, shared experiences, obligations, and reciprocal ties or formalized through religious rites such as baptism (Guevarra, 2010; Medina, 2001; Szanton, 1979). As such, the process of considering non-kin as family, with all the implied obligations and roles, is typical within the Philippine context. Our respondents had substantial shared experience with their peers in the community, and they relied on each other for practical and emotional support—all of which contributed to close friendships and family-like relationships (Espiritu, 2003).

Second, hierarchies emerged based on age and length of tenure in the community. Kuya Tun, the local school service driver, held much authority in this reconstructed family, with *yayas* identifying him as their advisor, organizer of get-togethers, mediator of disagreements, host of daily breakfasts, and occasional lender of money. Felicidad was another individual to whom many *yayas* deferred. She had facilitated the recruitment and hiring of several young women to work in the neighborhood, many of whom are her younger relatives. Felicidad provided guidance and advice to the younger and newly arrived *yayas*, helping them navigate the new terrain of paid domestic work, employer-employee relations, and the challenges of family separation. Anna, a young woman of about 20 years, tells us that it was Felicidad who provided her guidance and comfort whenever she began to doubt her decision to leave her child. It was Felicidad who encouraged her to

stay on the job and reminded her of the need to earn money to send for the care of her infant.

Hierarchies based on age and social status and the identification of leaders is typical in Filipino families. Local Filipino scholars have described such important roles within families as the *taga-salo* or the unofficial leader who typically steps up when a member needs financial support or reconciles disagreements among members. *Taga-salo*, which literally translates to “the one who catches;’ is usually the eldest in the family. Bulatao (1998, as cited in Udarbe, 2001) noted that it is typical within families for the emergence of an *Ate* or *Kuya* (i.e., literally translated, these mean “older sister” or “older brother;’ respectively; but figuratively these mean someone of higher status) who mediates fights or bears greater responsibility in the group. Kuya Tun and Felicidad fulfilled their roles as the *Kuya* and *Ate* for the *yayas*. The *yayas* in turn played their roles in deferring to the leader, for instance, by seeking and heeding their advice and asking for assistance (e.g., loans). *Yayas* report that when disagreements arose, the *taga-salo*’s mediation and direction were respected.

### ***Family Life With Employers***

The ambiguous boundaries between personal and professional worlds and the potentially exploitative nature of paid domestic work has been documented in numerous studies and rich ethnographic accounts in numerous countries such as India (Ray & Qayum, 2009), South Africa (Ally, 2009), and the United States (MacDonald, 2009). Living under the same roof, helping raise another’s child, participating in meaningful family rituals (e.g., meals, vacations), and establishing close personal relationships with employers easily engender closeness on the one hand but also make it difficult to negotiate one’s rights as an employee, and the ambiguous boundaries can further reinforce social hierarchies (Stiel & England, 1997; Tappert & Dobner, 2015). And although close employer-employee relations may be mutually beneficial and engender reciprocal respect (i.e., personalism), it can also result in the exploitation and maintenance of asymmetrical power relations between employer and employee (i.e., paternalism/maternalism; Arnado, 2003).

The blurring of personal and professional boundaries was clearly evident from our discussions with *yayas* in our study. Our respondents referred to their employers using kinship terms (e.g., “*Ate*” or older sister and “*Kuya*” for older brother), as is typical in Philippine households employing domestic workers. It should be noted, however, that the use of such terms does not necessarily reflect “family-like” relationship but that it is customary in Philippine households. Respondents spoke of the positive treatment they received and directly mentioned being considered as “part of the family” in their places of employment. Respondents described this situation as positive and ideal—a setting that netted multiple benefits. At the most basic level, being “part of the family” endowed respondents with practical benefits such as humane working conditions and basic rights, which may not always be available given the lack of general oversight of this labor sector in the Philippines. One respondent noted that, as a family member, she was never suspected nor accused of stealing—a difficult experience that many of her peers had undergone in other households. This respondent also reported that she was never scolded for lack of frugality in use of household supplies, telling us, “when things like laundry soap or pantry items run out, they just put it on the grocery list.” Another respondent noted that she had gotten close to the family and, as such, she could request periodic vacations to see her own children without fear of immediately being replaced. She notes, “Even when I leave for 2 months for a vacation, they wait for me, they don’t just get a replacement.”

Most respondents reported receiving gifts and other tangible rewards: pay advances and being able to borrow or ask for additional money, as well as gifts and items for their own children, such as toys and clothes that their wards had outgrown. Others reported being treated with kindness and empathy: employers asking how they were doing and inquiring about their physical and emotional well-being. “They ask how my children back home are doing,” one reported. Another *yaya* noted that her employer was a single mom to a son and, as such, treats her like a co-parent rather than as a *yaya*. She reports that her employer solicits her advice and gives weight to her recommendations. Another respondent, Shelda, had recently been hospitalized, and it was her employers who paid for her care and stayed by her bedside until she was discharged, showing not just financial support but also emotional care more typically seen among family members.

Clearly, participants saw “being part of the family” as beneficial and essential to having a positive work experience and for basic protection of their rights, consistent with findings by Amado (2003), who similarly examined the experiences of Filipina household workers in the Philippine setting. One respondent, Marivic (mid-20s) described her employment situation as such: “I’m lucky I encountered them. They don’t treat me like *ibang tao*.” Note that the delineation between “*ibang tao*” (different from us) versus “*hindi ibang tao*” (not different from us) is highly significant in Filipino society and to a large extent dictates levels of interaction, intimacy, and behaviors (Pasco, Morse, & Olson, 2004). Being *hindi ibang tao* evokes mutual trust and reciprocal obligations and interactions that are beyond mere civility or surface-level harmony (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). Participants who felt that they were treated as *hindi ibang tao* spoke of this experience with pride—telling us that they ate the same food as the family, that they were told they were essential members of the family, and that the family could no longer function as a family without the *yaya*’s presence. For example, Marina reports that her employer tells her that if her children were ever to visit her in the city, they could come and stay at that home, saying, “you are not different from us after all.”

In contrast, those who were treated as *ibang tao* (i.e., different from us) were resentful. One *yaya* described how she not only ate separately from her employers but also was given food that was different from what the family ate. To retaliate, she indicated, “I would just steal their food ... so I can taste what they are also eating.” Another respondent, Malumi, contrasts her previous employer, who treated her simply as paid help, versus her current employer, who treats her like family. Of her previous employer she says,

Whenever something happened to their child, they blamed me. Even inside the house and the couple was eating and the toddler was walking around, and she wasn’t that good at walking yet. When she stumbled, there you go they would blame me [sobbing]. They told me that this is exactly why they hired a *yaya*. It’s not that they spoke to me in a bad way. But I couldn’t speak up because I’m just working as a domestic ... they don’t see that I’m with that child all day. When they come home, they just go to sleep. Sometimes,

they check on the child. And if they see anything, like a red spot ... there you go.

And, of her current employer who treats her like family, Malumi describes how and why she has persisted for several years under their employment. Early on in her tenure as *yaya*, she had fallen seriously ill and needed immediate treatment that was anticipated to be complicated and costly. Malumi describes her current employer's response:

That is why I sort of have *utang-na-loob* [debt of gratitude] to them .... At the hospital, I was told I had some cysts on my fallopian tubes. I didn't plan to have an operation there. They put me under observation for a month if they could take the cysts out. And then my employer told me he would take care of the whole thing-to go ahead and get the treatment at the hospital. At first they were just going to observe but my boss said to get the full treatment. They paid for everything. They said I shouldn't go to the rural hospitals because I might just die. You know, I didn't have money. So the whole thing, they said to go ahead and get the operation done. She [the boss] was nice. Other things like my transportation fare, every year [i.e., after visiting home], they pay. They'd even say "you haven't been home for a year," like that.

Scholars have pointed out that such blurring of boundaries between personal and professional worlds can pose high risks for exploitation, allowing employers to impinge on the rights of employees or encroach on their personal space (Amado, 2003; Bakan & Stasiulis, 1997). Indeed, research has shown how paternalism and maternalism, or employers' endowment of benefits and "like family" treatment to domestic workers, can foster an environment that makes it difficult for workers to negotiate personal space and employment rights (Lan, 2003). How does one then explain the generally positive regard of porous boundaries between personal life and work reported here? In the Philippine setting, closely bonded relationships outside the family are typical, and delineations between *hindi ibang tao* and *ibang tao* weigh heavily. Moreover, although the limited empirical work and news accounts of such blurring of personal-professional spheres in Philippine domestic work suggest high potential for exploitation absent these

clear boundaries (see, e.g., the recent article “My Family’s Slave,” Tizon, 2017), the case of *yayas* may be unique. Paid domestic work in childcare entails entrusting the *yaya* with the care, health, and well-being of one’s children. Discussions with our respondents suggest that the “like family” relationship obligates not just the employee to the employer, but also vice versa. That is, a “debt of gratitude” or *utang na loob* is felt by both employer and employee. For example, *yayas* indicated that they were well aware of how employers find it difficult to find reliable and trustworthy people with whom they could leave their children. They talked about the difficult demands that caring for a child entails and how the work of being a *yaya* is not for everyone. One *yaya* told us that her employers tell her how lucky they are to have found her, such that they could leave for even a day or two and entrust her with their child. Ime, who we referenced earlier, told us that she was the fourth in a line of *yayas* hired to care for Johnny, a 5-year-old boy who other *yayas* had found difficult to handle. Another *yaya*, Marivic, talked about the challenges of caring for her ward, who was 5 years old at the time of the interview:

I took care of her when she was so small. She was premature. I took care of her way back. So there, that’s why they [employers] are so thankful to me. Because I persisted. I really put in a lot of effort in caring for their child, even as a baby. When she was a newborn, they [employers] would even sometimes leave because they didn’t want not to be able to sleep .... And she was difficult to care for. She wouldn’t eat. I had to feed her with a dropper .... But I did it. I lasted .... That’s why they like me. They ask me, they say “*Ate* [older sister], just don’t leave.” They let me go on vacation and they ask, “you will come back, right?” They will not get a replacement.

Other *yayas* reported being told that they were so essential in the household that they could “ask for anything” so long as they did not leave. Several others witnessed the difficulty that the households experienced when they took days off and reported knowing that they were indispensable in the household.

Nonetheless, the “like family” treatment that *yayas* receive from their employers also resulted in a sense of obligation that tied respondents to their employers in ways that went beyond simple employee



duties. Earlier, we noted Shelda's experience with her employer who stayed by her bedside during her confinement at the hospital. Shelda describes her "payment" for this family-like treatment this way:

The others, they say, "This *yaya* is so lucky. She was hospitalized and her boss paid for it. Where do you see this? I wish we could find something like this!" And my boss says, "just promise that you'll take care of these kids and we'll be okay" [i.e., payment is paid]. And I say, "you can see, I'm doing just that." And they are pleased because they see that even if I have something scheduled already and if they say, "we have to go somewhere;" I will move my plans. So there you go. Even when I've delayed my plans again and again, I'll still do it. Because they are important. And I love their child.

Shelda's description mirrors the experiences of many of our other respondents. Several *yayas* noted changing their plans and cutting their vacations short if their employers needed them, and they would comply out of sense of debt for being treated well and for being considered part of the family. "It hasn't even been an hour of my day off, and they text me when they can't pacify her, asking me to come home;" says Marivic. Similarly, Maria, a mother of three, tells us that although she had intended to visit her own children during the Christmas season, she would be unable to do so because her employers scheduled an out-of-town road trip and asked that she come along because she is the only one who can pacify her ward. During earlier visits home, she had on several occasions cut her trip short to the dismay of her own children, who would say things like "there she goes again, mom is leaving again;" because her ward and the other domestic workers employed in the same household would call her on the phone and beg for her to return. She tells us that there is little she can do given how close she is to her ward and how much her employers rely on her.

For other respondents, being considered part of the family and their sense of closeness with their wards and employers tied them to their jobs even when they sometimes considered leaving. Marivic describes how she is so close to her employer and ward that although she sometimes considers returning to her children for good, she feels unable to do so:

Sometimes when she [employer] scolds me, she will tell me later, “sorry about that, I just had so much on my mind, I’m so busy.” But that’s very rare. She’s usually just very quiet when she has problems at work. I understand when she doesn’t talk to me. I totally understand because sometimes she has to stay over at work ... she and her husband. And then they sometimes say that even a full month they could leave their child with me, she really trusts me. After all, I saw her grow up. I have a good relation with her [daughter]. She obeys me. She doesn’t disobey. Sometimes, I think of leaving but I don’t know how I would tell them. Yes, I plan to leave some time, but I don’t know how to tell them because they haven’t given me bad treatment. They even ask me how my kids are. They give me so much ... anything I ask for. They say, “when you need money, let us know.”

Respondents did not report making conscious efforts to make clearer delineations between personal and professional spheres with regard to time commitments, workload, or pay. The one area in which respondents did report trying to clarify boundaries was in exercising caution with regard to closeness with their wards. *Yayas* reported being very emotionally close to their wards and treating them as their own children (see de Guzman, 2014). Our observations of their interactions corroborate those assertions, as is reflected in our field notes:

Nannies appear to be very familiar with the kids. Teachers talk to them about the homework assignments, and some nannies discuss with each other what they need to review with the kids .... Some nannies at drop off tell the kids “I love you” and “kiss *yaya*,” and nannies also tease the kids in a *malambing* (teasingly affectionate) way. For example, there was a birthday party so some of the kids were leaving with a piece of cake and the nannies would say “*pahingi naman*” (i.e., give me some). Nannies appear to dote on the kids for the most part-wiping their faces, etc.

*Yayas* take on tasks of an intimate nature (e.g., bathing, feeding), and many spend more hours in close proximity with the child than

do the parents. As such, several of our respondents noted that, in the household, the *yaya* and ward were sometimes closer than the child and parent:

That's why I cannot easily take a day off. "No more day off for *yaya*," she [the ward] says. So when I do take a day off, I have to escape at night. And my boss says, "don't let her notice that you're leaving." So I say, "bye, good night!" and they ask me to pretend that I'm about to go to sleep so she [ward] won't come to my bedroom to check. Her dad says that if this child were to chose between mommy, daddy or *yaya*, that she would say "I want to go with *yaya*." And they're fine with that. They're pleased by that. But they tell me that it's okay as long as I don't leave.

Whereas Sheila expressed no concern over her extreme closeness to her ward, nonetheless, most other participants reported making conscious efforts to establish emotional distance from the children they care for. Several respondents alluded to discouraging the children from engaging in behaviors that reflected very close and intimate relations that they deemed appropriate only within a parent-child relationship. Ime, for example, talks about how her 5-year-old ward often hugs her and tells her that he loves her. They have grown so close that Ime notes missing him and longing to be with him when she goes home to visit her own child, who she has not been able to see grow up. At the same time, her ward calls her on the phone and cries, begging her to come back whenever she takes days off. When her ward tries to give her a kiss, Ime tells him "only on the cheeks, not the lips" and explains that kisses on the lips are only appropriate for one's parents. Furthermore, her ward expresses wanting to sleep beside her at night but that she encourages him to stay in the same bedroom with his parents as this is where he "should sleep."

*Yayas'* motivations to distance themselves from their wards were complex. Some reasoned that being too close simply "wasn't right" and could not explain further. For some, the main motivation was that they did not want to encroach on the parent-child relationship. Ime, for example, talks about how she disagreed with some of the parents' ways, such as the late bedtime for her ward. However, she respected the parents' rights to make decisions for their own children. Related

to this sentiment, other *yayas* thought it was not right for parents to give up caregiving for their children completely. One *yaya* complained that her employer spent so little time with her ward and returned the child to her as soon as the child fusses. Marivic's description captures some of these sentiments:

They [employer and ward] are close. It's not like other kids who don't get to see their parents. I teach her not to be distant from her mom. I teach her ways. There are kids who have fits or who don't notice when their parents come. I don't want her mom to say she's [ward] too close to me. They do spend time together.

Finally, some *yayas* hinted at the guilt that they felt in becoming so close to their wards while at the same time depriving their own children of their care and attention. "It is tough. I started taking care of Johnny when he was 7 months when the last *yaya* left. Now my feelings for him are deeper than my feelings for my own child."

### **Implications and Conclusion**

In this chapter, we sought to explore the remaking of family life in the host communities of rural-to-urban workers employed in paid domestic care work. Our study illuminates four main points. First, despite the growing ubiquity of communicative media and mobility that allows many migrants to maintain family ties across distance, access to these resources remains limited for many. There is vast diversity in the experiences and status of migrants (e.g., migration status, geographical location) and, consequently, in their access to economic and social resources, which in turn have important consequences for their ability to maintain family ties. For our respondents, access to typical tools for maintaining long-distance family life was highly constrained.

Second, given the challenges of maintaining family ties across distance, many domestic workers recreate family life in their new communities. We focus on two reconstructed family groups here: family that is co-constructed with other domestic workers in their receiving communities and family that they build with their employers. These fictive kinships were an important source of social support and sense

of family life that respondents deemed important given their own separation from kinfolk and the heavy demands of their work.

Third, we suggest that becoming “one of the family” within the employer’s household is essential for migrants’ positive job experience in the Philippine context. To this end, we examined how *yayas* conceptualize, interpret, and evaluate the notion of being part of the family in the context of their paid domestic work. And although social hierarchies and power differentials were still clearly evident, the “one of the family” experience tied both the employer and employee to the relationship, providing mutual benefits such as job security, material gifts, and emotional assurances for the employee and, in turn, high job quality, loyalty, and trustworthiness in caring for the children for the employer. It is perhaps for these many benefits that respondents did not express a desire to establish emotional distance from their employers. However, for a complexity of reasons—a sense of propriety, notions of what is best for their ward, and personal guilt over caring more for their ward than their own child—several respondents noted trying to set emotional boundaries between themselves and their wards even though the *yaya-ward* relationship tended to be very close and emotionally connected.

Finally, the need to incorporate the cultural context and culturally embedded notions of family life in understanding separation and the remaking of family was evident in our findings. Because family life and culture are inextricable and intimately intertwined, the experience and consequences of separation must also be examined in light of the broader cultural and social context. Traditional family roles (e.g., *taga-salo*) were evident in relationships with other domestic workers who reconstructed family life in ways that reflected hierarchies and roles within their fictive kinships. Similarly, family life built with employers reflected asymmetrical power relations that were complicated by traditional Filipino notions of extended family, *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) and implications of in-group (Le., *hindi ibang tao* or not different from us) versus out-group (Le., *ibang tao* or different from us) distinction for personal and professional relationships within the sphere of paid domestic work.

It goes without saying that family life does not occur in a vacuum. Chapters in this volume challenge us to extend our thinking to include a wide range of configurations of family that emerge as a result of physical separation in contemporary life. Our findings illustrate a

rich complexity of family life-how it is dynamic as it shifts in response to societal change but also somewhat constant in its underlying traditional notions and cultural beliefs about roles and obligations embedded therein. Our findings also illustrate how family life in its reconstructed form benefits its members, providing a deep sense of social support, satisfaction, and personal and social capital, as well as empowering individuals in their roles (e.g., as employer or employee), but nonetheless also ensnaring members into obligations that result in the loss of personal boundaries. Exploring and acknowledging such complexities in family life is essential as we begin to unpack and better understand contemporary family life in all its forms in the age of migration, mobility, and globalization.

## References

- Alampay, I. P. (2014). Parenting in the Philippines. In H. Selin (Ed.), *Parenting across cultures: Childrearing, motherhood and fatherhood in non-Western cultures* (vol. 7. pp. 459-474). Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-94-007-7503-9.
- Ally, S. (2009). *From servants to workers: South African domestic workers and the democratic state*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.
- Arnado, J. M. (2003). Maternalism in mistress-maid relations: The Philippine experience. *Journal of International Womens Studies*, 4(3),154-177.
- Asis, M. M. B., Huang, S., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2004). When the light of the home is abroad: Unskilled female migration and the Filipino family. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*. 25(2).198-215.
- Bakan, A. B., & Stasiulis, D. (1997). Introduction. In A. B. Bakan & D. Stasiulis (eds.). *Not one of the family: Foreign domestic workers in Canada* (pp. 3-28). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Baldassar, L., Baldock, C. V., & Wilding, R. (2007). Communicating across borders. In L. Baldassar, C. V. Baldock, & R. Wilding (eds.). *Families caring across borders: Migration, ageing and transnational caregiving* (pp. 108-136). New York: Palgrave.
- Baldassar, L., & Merla, L. (2014). Introduction: Transnational family caregiving through the lens of circulation. In L. Baldassar, & L. Merla (eds.). *Transnational families, migration and the circulation of care: Understanding mobility and absence in family life* (pp. 3-24). New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Boccagni, P. (2012). Practising motherhood at a distance: Retention and loss in Ecuadorian transnational families. *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies*. 38(2). 261-277. doi:10.1080/1369183X.2012.646421.

- Boris, E., & Parreñas, R. (2010). Introduction. In E. Boris (Ed.). *Intimate labors: Cultures, technologies, and the politics of care* (pp. 1-12). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bryceson, D., & Vuorela, U. (2002). Transnational families in the twenty-first century. In D. Bryceson & U. Vuorela (eds.). *The Transnational family: New European frontiers and global networks* (pp. 3-29). Oxford: Berg.
- Chen, M. A. (2011). Recognizing domestic workers, regulating domestic work: Conceptual, measurement, and regulatory challenges. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 23(1), 167-184.
- Cox, R., & Narula, R. (2003). Playing happy families: Rules and relationships in au pair employing households in London, England. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 10(4), 333-344.
- de Guzman, M. R. T. (2014). Yaya: Philippine domestic workers, the children they care for and the children they leave behind. *International Perspectives in Psychology*, 3(3), 197-214.
- de Guzman, M. R. T., & Garcia, A. S. (2017). From bonds to bridges and back again: The making of a Filipino community in Poland. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.
- Domestic Workers Act of 2012, R. A. 10361, 15th Congo (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.gov.ph/downloads/2013/01jan120130118-RA-10361-BSA.pdf>
- Ebaugh, H. R., & Curry M. (2000). Fictive kin as social capital in new immigrant communities. *Sociological Perspectives*, 43, 189-209. doi:10.2307/11389793.
- Espiritu, Y. L. (2003). *Homebound: Filipino American lives across cultures, communities, and countries*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fresnoza-Flot, A. (2009). Migration status and transnational mothering: The case of Filipino migrants in France. *Global Networks*, 9, 252-270. doi:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2009.00253.x
- Guevarra, R. P. (2010). Compadrinazgo. In H. Ling & A. Austin (eds.), *Asian Americans: An encyclopedia* (Vol 2, pp. 267-268). New York: Routledge.
- International Labour Organization. (2011). *Decent work for domestic workers: Convention 189 and Recommendation 201 at a glance*. Retrieved from [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed\\_protect/-protrav/-travail/documents/publication/wcms\\_170438.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_protect/-protrav/-travail/documents/publication/wcms_170438.pdf)
- International Labour Organization. (2013). *Domestic workers across the world: Global and regional statistics and the extent of legal protection*. Retrieved from [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/-publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_173363.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/-publ/documents/publication/wcms_173363.pdf)
- Keller, H., Lamm, B., Abels, M., Yovsi, R., Borke, J., Jensen, H., ... Chaudhary, N. (2006). Cultural models, socialization goals, and parenting ethnotheories. *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology*, 37(2), 155-172.
- Kim, E. C. (2009). "Mama's family": Fictive kinship and undocumented immigrant workers. *Ethnography*, 10(4), 497-513. doi:10.1177/11466138109347000.
- King, R., Cela, E., Fokkema, T., & Vullnetari, J. (2014). The migration and well-being of the Zero Generation: Transgenerational care, grandparenting and loneliness amongst Albanian older people. *Population, Place and Space*, 20(8), 728-738.

- Krzywiowski, L., & Mucha, J. (2014). Transnational caregiving in turbulent times: Polish migrants in Iceland and their elderly parents in Poland. *International Sociology*, 29(1), 22-37.
- Laczko, F. (2008). Migration and development: The forgotten migrants. In J. DeWind and J. Holdaway (eds.), *Migration and development within and across borders: Research and policy perspectives on internal and international migration* (pp. 7-11). Geneva: International Organization for Migration.
- Lan, p-c. (2003). Negotiating social boundaries and private zones: The micropolitics of employing migrant domestic workers. *Social Problems*, 50(4), 525-549.
- Luebker, M. (2013, January 9). *Domestic workers make an important contribution to national economies* [Video file]. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v\\_eFRuxuJoj\\_g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v_eFRuxuJoj_g)
- Macdonald, C. L. (2009). *Shadow mothers: Nannies, au pairs, and the micropolitics of mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2011). Mobile phone parenting: Reconfiguring relationships between Filipina migrant mothers and their left-behind children. *New Media and Society*, 13(3), 457-470.
- Mason, J. (2004). Managing kinship over long distances: The significance of "the visit": *Social Policy and Society*, 3(4), 421-429. doi:10.1017/S1474746404002052.
- McCay, D. (2016). *An archipelago of care: Filipino migrants and global networks*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Medina, B. T. G. (2001). *The Filipino family* (2nd ed.). Quezon City, PH: University of the Philippines Press.
- Pasco, C. Y., Morse, J. M., & Olson, J. K. (2004). Cross-cultural relationships between nurses and Filipino Canadian patients. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 36(3), 239-246.
- Pe-Pua, R., & Protacio-Marcelino, E. (2000). Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Filipino psychology): A legacy of Virgilio G. Enriquez. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 3, 49-71.
- Ray, R., & Qayum, S. (2009). *Cultures of servitude: Modernity, domesticity, and class in India*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Schiopu, I., & Siegfried, N. (2006). *Determinants of workers' remittances: Evidence from the European Neighboring Region*. Working Paper Series 688. Retrieved from the European Central Bank website: <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/pdf/scpwps/ecbwp688.pdf?31c4dfff2b68deec5gef90384bc8e4f>
- Stiell, B., & England, K. (1997). Domestic distinctions: Constructing difference among paid domestic workers in Toronto. *Gender, Place, and Culture*, 43(3), 339-359.
- Szanton, M. C. B. (1979). The uses of compadrazgo: Views from a Philippine town. *Philippine Sociological Review*, 27(3), 161-180.
- Tappert, S., & Dobner, M. (2015). Being a member of the family? Meanings and implications in paid migrant domestic and care work in Madrid. In M. Kontos and G. T. Bonifacio (eds.), *Migrant domestic workers and family life: International perspectives* (pp. 276-299). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.



- Therborn, G. (2009). Family. In R. A. Shweder, T. R. Bidell, A. C. Dailey, S. Dixon, P. J. Miller, & J. Modell (eds.), *The child: An encyclopedic companion* (pp. 333-338). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tizon, A. (2017, June). My family slave. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/lolas-story/524490/>
- Udarbe, M. H. (2001). The Tagasalo personality. *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, 34(2),45-65.
- Waldinger, R. (2007). Between here and there: How attached are Latino immigrants to their native country? *Pew Hispanic Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/80.pdf>
- Weisner, T. S. (2014). Culture, context and child well-being. In A. Ben-Arieh, F. Casas, I. Frønes, & J. E. Korbin (eds.), *Handbook of child well-being: Theories, methods and policies in global perspectives* (pp. 87-104). Netherlands: Springer.