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Mobile phone parenting: Reconfiguring relationships between Filipina migrant mothers and their left-behind children

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Mirca Madianou (Goldsmiths-University of London) & **Daniel Miller** (University College London, UK)

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 recognized 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 article draws on comparative research with UK-based Filipina migrants – mainly domestic workers and nurses – and their left-behind children in the Philippines. Our methodology allowed us to directly compare the experience of mothers and their children. The article concludes that while mothers feel empowered that the phone has allowed them to partially reconstruct their role as parents, their children are significantly more ambivalent about the consequences of transnational communication.

Keywords

ethnography, migration, mobile phones, parenting, Philippines, separation, transnational families, UK

Corresponding author: Mirca Madianou m.madianou@gold.ac.uk

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Introduction

'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 characterize 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 et al., 2006; 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 recognized 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

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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 article 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 (2007–08) 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.¹ About half of these migrants are deployed on fixed-term contracts that require renewal, which together with other restrictions explains why it is difficult for women to be joined by their families.² By 2006, following aggressive government marketing (Asis, 2005: 34), annual deployment was in excess of one million per annum (Asis, 2008; POEA, 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

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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 recognized 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 al., 2008). Widding Isaksen et al. (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 the global south while children in the global north get '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 al., 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 (McKay, 2007; Yeates, 2004), or the empowering potential of migration for women. It also assumes a normative and universal perspective of biological motherhood which should be performed in a situation of co-presence.

Several previous studies have explored the consequences of separation for Filipino families (Asis, 2008; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; McKay, 2007; Paragas, 2009; Parreñas, 2005a, 2005b). 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 emphasized 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 among 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.

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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 Chesley, 2005; Rakow and Navarro, 1993). 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 phonesubscribers 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 eight mobile phone networks, the market is dominated by Globe and Smart with over 16 million and 17 million subscribers each (National Statistical Coordination Board, 2007: 1323).

Although mobile phones are clearly the dominant communication technology in the Philippine context, they are part of an emerging, but rapidly developing, communication ecology comprising of multiple platforms, many of which are internet-based, such as email, instant messaging, videocalling (using software such as Skype or Yahoo Messenger) and social networking sites (dominated by Friendster and Facebook). We call this emerging environment of proliferating communicative opportunities, 'polymedia' (Madianou and Miller, in preparation) although, admittedly, such opportunities are available primarily to those in urban areas and affluent enough to afford the related costs. Within this environment, it was the rise of mobile phones together with international calling cards (Vertovec, 2004) that opened up the possibilities for instant and frequent communication.

The ubiquitousness of mobile phones in the Philippines has led to a pronounced optimism within at least some government bodies with regard to the potential of mobile communication for alleviating the social costs of migration, as is 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 organized by the relevant state authorities, the POEA and OWWA (Overseas Workers' Welfare Administration). Interestingly, both organizations' regular commercial sponsor is Globe, one of the two dominant mobile phone corporations, which also sponsors the 'Model OFW Family of the

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Year Award', a competition that recognizes a financially successful migrant family whose members maintain close family ties despite separation. Our research, which directly compares the perspectives of migrant mothers and left-behind children, investigates such assumptions about the capacity of mobile communication to deal with the problems of family 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 the Middle East or Hong Kong. Apart from occasional access to employers' phones they also relied on public phones which were usually prohibitively expensive. Elisa recalls weekends in Saudi when she and her friends had to queue to make their calls. 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 numbers³ 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 PHP⁴ 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

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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-calls⁵ 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 SMSs 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. Teenage children's texting may be dominated by requests for money or specific gifts. Although our participants invariably respond to such demands they sometimes experience them as intrusive, or inappropriately demanding, especially when they are made 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

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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 see their mobile phones as a treasured possession and also a major source of recreation (Fortunati, 2002; Horst and Miller, 2006; Law and Peng, 2006).

Greta, a mother of three in her 40s, also calls first thing in the morning. Instead of phone cards, she calls from her pc via SKYPE's paid service of Voice Over Internet Protocol (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 10 p.m. GMT) in order to wake them up for school (6 a.m. 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 platform of letters.

We can broadly distinguish between two patterns: between those who left the Philippines before the advent of mobile phones and who experienced a period when communication was 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 whose families are more likely to have landlines and good internet connection and therefore a wider range of communicative opportunities. However, all our participants agreed that mobile phones were the key medium for communicating with their families and that it represented a significant improvement from the past situation.

Our 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

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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, 2012; Madianou and Miller, 2011). Mobile phones – together with other communications media – are the means through which they can attempt to deal with and reconcile this ambivalence.

The children's perspective

As might be anticipated we encountered as wide a range of experiences among the children as among 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.

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. Although Bea's mother did not call as frequently as other parents, Bea still thought

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that it was too frequent as she felt she no longer had things in common with her mother. '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' (Bea).

Mothers would often have a particular time of the week when they would phone and while some children found this reassuring for others it was 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 is 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 [...] they still treated me as if I were a student. Because they don't see the changes that happened here.' This became evident to the children through the things parents sent back as presents which were often toys suited to children some years younger than their actual age. 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!'

The previously noted asymmetry in communication can also be resented by children. Lisa found that while her mother started calling more frequently when she obtained a mobile phone, 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. Her mother would always only call for 10 minutes after which the card would expire. As a consequence, they only had time talk about practical things. 'You don't really have the time to be closer' (Lisa).

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

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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 every day and effectively micromanage the household:

She would call every morning [at] around 6:30 a.m. 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.

Ofelia, who also maintained a very close relationship to her mother despite separation found voice communication to be most emotionally satisfying: '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.'

Conclusion

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. In the Philippines, this enthusiasm is shared by both the telecommunications industry itself and the government migration agencies and regulatory bodies who regard migration as state economic policy. Our research has tried to assess the consequences for those actually experiencing separation: that is, migrant mothers and left-behind children.

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. Overall, mobile phones have been enthusiastically welcomed by migrant mothers who report that mobile phone communication has significantly improved their ability to parent at a distance. Those most positively affected are those who came from rural or low-income areas, whose families rarely have access to landlines or internet connection. Interestingly, all mothers, even those who have access to a wider range of communication platforms, report that their preferred medium for keeping in touch with their children is the mobile phone partly because of the emotionality of voice communication. 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

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parents. Rather than simply seeing this as a confirmation of traditionally asymmetrical gender roles whereby the woman does all the caring in addition to her newly acquired role as main breadwinner (Parreñas, 2005), we argue that the situation is more complex as mobile phone communication allows mothers to deal with the ambivalence that is deeply ingrained in their decision to migrate, or even prolong migration.

Our evidence suggests, however, that the 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. Our data reveal that the left-behind children are much more ambivalent about the consequences of transnational communication compared to their mothers. That 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 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.

Although mobile phones are empowering for female migrants and present a number of opportunities for intimacy and care at a distance, our evidence suggests that we need to be cautious with regard to the celebratory discourse about the potential of the mobile phone to overcome problems of family separation. Inevitably, our participants' current experiences remain closely tied to the previous histories of both their relationships to each other and to the different communications media, which explains why transnational communication works better in some families than in others. Crucially, our research underlines the importance of taking a transnational perspective which investigates both migrants and those left-behind. If we had only conducted research in the UK or the Philippines and looked at only one end of the relationships (either migrant mothers, or left-behind children) we would have come up with different conclusions. We argue there is a clear need for more research on transnational processes which is methodologically truly transnational.

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

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this situation of absence when the relationship itself is largely constituted by communication. In this article 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 globalization.

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Notes

1. Based on our interviews with representatives from mobile companies.
2. The Philippine government has bilateral agreements with receiving countries (for example, several within the Middle East) to provide overseas workers on limited-time contracts.
3. 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.
4. Approximately £114.
5. 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 is incurred.

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