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Of mobile phones and mother-fathers: Calls, text messages, and conjugal power relations in mother- away Filipino families

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Abstract

This article examines how the mobile phone might matter in the exercise of conjugal power relations between left-behind fathers and migrant mothers in transnational Filipino families. Drawing on in-depth interviews of ten pairs of fathers and children from mother-away families, it reveals that the mobile phone provides parents avenues to both expand and hold on to their traditionally gender-differentiated roles. This means that while the technology mitigates some of the effects of migration, it also complicates the already complex relationships between these fathers and mothers. Unfortunately, this situation tends to amplify the tremendous difficulties of having to deal with two opposing forces: the changed realities in a transnational Filipino family and the traditional expectations of Philippine society. So while the mobile phone can lead to increasing cooperation between left-behind fathers and migrant mothers, it has mostly resulted in exacerbating the already tremendous chasms that divide them.

Keywords
conjugal power relations, doubling of place, in-depth interviews, mobile phone, transnational families

Introduction

This article looks into the role of the mobile phone in the exercise of conjugal power between left-behind fathers and migrant mothers from families separated by labor migration. Specifically, it examines how the mediated space that this technology creates matters in how these parents perform the roles that their societies traditionally ascribe to fathers and mothers. On the one hand, this space might allow them to maintain – at least to a degree – a semblance of the family order they had prior to the separation. This is because the mobile phone can provide them with an immediate means of communication, which can link them to one another and to their children despite their spatial and/or temporal distance (e.g., Madianou and Miller, 2011a; Paragas, 2009; Uy-Tioco, 2007). On the other hand, this space might also create the conditions for them to engage in new fathering and mothering practices, which could run contrary to previously established ones. This is because like other new media technologies, the mobile phone can present them with ways

of connecting that might not have been extensively used, if at all, in the context of their previous everyday life set-up (Moores, 2004).

The issue at hand is relevant to many poverty-stricken countries around the world, like Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. In these places, it has become common to hear stories of mothers having to tear themselves away from their husbands and children in order to pursue the prospects of better job opportunities abroad (e.g., Yeoh and Lam, 2006). At the same time, it has also been argued that mobile phones can help ease the detrimental effects of such a separation (e.g., Parreñas, 2005; Uy-Tioco, 2007). As a way of contributing to this debate – which lies at the intersection of both media and migration studies – this article focus on whether and how the mobile phone impacts on the relationship of those who belong to mother-away families in the Philippines. We argue that this serves as an excellent case study for two significant reasons.

For one, the mobile phone is presently the most preferred communication technology in the Philippines. National data from the past decade reveals that while landline telephone subscription in the country has remained virtually flat and that internet access has grown slowly, the number of mobile phone subscriptions has increased exponentially. In fact, the mobile phone now has an 80 percent household penetration rate (see Table 1). Mendes et al. (2007) claim that this is due to its short messaging system function (locally called 'texting') and its prepaid subscription option. They say that both of these have made the technology reachable and, more importantly, affordable to many Filipinos. As a testament to the ubiquity and centrality of this technology, there are now studies that have documented its importance in recent public movements for political reform, as in the case of the so-called second EDSA Revolution that ousted then-President Joseph Ejercito from power (e.g., Rafael, 2003; Rheingold, 2002). There is also the fact that the Philippines is now known as the 'texting capital of the world', as it has the world's highest number of text messages sent. In 2009 for instance, the average Filipino mobile phone user sent a monthly average of 600 texts, which was 43 percent more than their US counterparts (Dimacali, 2010).

Table 1. Landline telephone, internet, and mobile phone subscribers in the Philippines.

YEAR	NO. OF LANDLINE TELEPHONE SUBSCRIBERS (millions)	ESTIMATED NO. OF INTERNET SUBSCRIBERS (millions)	NO. OF MOBILE PHONE SUBSCRIBERS (millions)
2000	3.31	0.400	6.45
2002	3.31	0.800	15.38
2005	3.37	1.440	34.78

(*Source*: Mendes et al, 2007)

This general preference that Philippine society has for the mobile phone tends to be mirrored in its transnational families, especially with those who are from the lower socio-economic class (Aguilar et al., 2009; Madianou and Miller, 2011a; Paragas, 2009). Despite

the mobile phone's special status though, it should be seen as part of an emerging trend that is establishing the 'polymedia' (Madianou and Miller, 2011c), which is a communicative ecology characterized by the increasing availability of varied media platforms. It is, after all, just one – although an important one – of the many technologies that are moving transnational families towards a context of an increasingly instant and frequent communication, which is something very different from the olden days of cassette tapes, letters and landline telephone calls (cf. Madianou and Miller, 2011b; Paragas, 2009).

The other significance of this article's focus is that around 10 percent of the 90 million-strong Filipino population lives in 135 different countries and territories (Bautista, 2002). This makes the Philippines one of the biggest exporters of migrant labor in the world. But more than this, its international labor force is highly feminized, with many women working abroad in care work, such as being a domestic helper, a caregiver, and a nurse. This has meant the proliferation of many left-behind fathers and left-behind children (Parreñas, 2005).

Despite (or perhaps because of) the increasing ubiquity of transnational Filipino fami- lies, the dominant discourse in contemporary Philippine society contends that such families are dysfunctional (Parreñas, 2005). More than father-away families, however, it is mother-away families that are thought to be a greater threat to the maintenance of Filipino family norms. In the context of a so-called masculine society – where gender norms and social roles are not to be transgressed – they are seen to have a greater impact on reversing the father's traditional role of breadwinning and the mother's traditional role of nurturing (Hofstede, 2001; Medina, 2001). But then again, mobile phones are thought to somehow mitigate this by allowing migrant women an avenue for transnational mothering. This idea appears not only in scholarly works (e.g., Uy-Tioco, 2007), but also in official state- ments from the Philippine national government and advertising materials of local mobile phone corporations, namely Globe and Smart (cf. Madianou and Miller, 2011a).

In this article, we hope to engage and enrich the field of media and migration in two key ways. In relation to media studies, the article seeks to expand the understanding of the phenomenon that Moores (2004) calls the doubling of place. This concept pertains to how the new media tend to pluralize people's experience of space and, subsequently, of relation- ships. It argues that while people need to deal with the social conventions of the new media space, they also have to deal with the different – and at times opposing – social conventions of the everyday world. There are, of course, many studies that have already examined how various transnational relationships play out in relation to this doubling of place. Most of these, however, focus on cultural identity formation (e.g., Cabanes, 2009; Hiller and Franz, 2004; Ignacio, 2005; Mitra, 2005; Tyner and Kuhlke, 2000), as well as on civic and political engagement (e.g., Hirji, 2006; Ong and Cabanes, 2011; Yu, 2005). By turning its attention to the exercise of conjugal power between left-behind fathers and migrant mothers, this article hopes to shed light on a relationship that is rather understudied, even if it is just as important as these others that have already received significant attention.

Meanwhile, in relation to migration studies, the article hopes to add a new angle to how transnational Filipino families have been researched. As of the moment, most of these studies focus on the relationship between migrant mothers and their left-behind children (e.g., Madianou and Miller, 2011a; Madianou and Miller, 2011c; Parreñas, 2005; Uy-Tioco, 2007). Researchers have rarely made left-behind fathers proper subjects of their studies, with their role in the family usually inferred from the stories of the mothers and the children. In those instances when they are mentioned, they are invariably portrayed as uninvolved parents who serve as a foil to migrant mothers. While they are thought to do little, the mothers are depicted as suffering the double-burden of being both the family breadwinner and nurturer. There is, however, Pingol's (2008) Remaking Masculinities, which provides a more nuanced view of left-behind fathers. In this work, she asserts that many of them also suffer from severe pressures from Philippine society. The combination of their inability to provide for their family and their willingness to take on a nurturing role becomes a hallmark of their compromised masculinity. As such, they suffer the stigma of being under de saya (a henpecked husband). There is also Aguilar et al.'s (2009) Maalwang Buhay (The Good Life), which examines the impact of migration from various viewpoints: the mother, the father, the children, the extended family, and even the community at large. Here, fathers are depicted as having to deal with the difficulties of how migration transforms conjugal, parental, familial, and even community relations. This article hopes to follow both these works through an examination of how mobile phones might matter in the experience of being a left-behind father.

In summary, this article aims to contribute to the literature on media and migration by delving into how the intertwining of the mediated space of the mobile phone and the everyday life contexts of transnational Filipino families transform the exercise of conjugal power relations between left-behind fathers and migrant mothers. What we have found is that although the mediated space of the mobile phone does allow the left-behind fathers and migrant mothers an expansion of their gender roles, it does not enable them to completely disregard existing gender role boundaries. Because of these, the mobile phone tends to complicate the relationship between the left-behind fathers and the migrant mothers. So while it can lead to increasing cooperation between them, it has mostly resulted in exacerbating the already tremendous chasms that divide them. Before we elaborate on this, we first flesh out the theoretical framework.

The doubling of place and the exercise of conjugal power relations

For this article, we draw on the media scholar Shaun Moores' (2004) notion of the doubling of place. As a parallel to Scannel's (1991) earlier argument that the broadcast media had brought about (the then-) new possibilities of being in two places at once, he posits that the new media also have the capacity to pluralize people's experiences of space. He points out that in engaging with these technologies, people find themselves equally entrenched within the realm of the new media and the world of the everyday. As a consequence, people find themselves having to negotiate with the pluralized relationships that these colliding spaces bring about. There is no doubt that this idea has firmly superseded the once popular supposition that the online world is a space that is completely detached from the offline world (e.g., Bassett, 1997; Turkle, 1996). This is

evident in the increasing number of works that posit similar ideas, such as Silverstone and Hirsch's (1992) edited volume on how media and information technologies are consumed at home, Berry et al.'s (2010) anthology on how the various media transform our notions of material places, and, closest to the work at hand, Miller and Horst's (2006) anthropological study of mobile phones in Jamaican society.

Unfortunately, we have yet to encounter any research that links the concept of the doubling of place to the exercise of conjugal power relations, especially in relation to transnational families. Because of this gap in the literature, we shall instead discuss works that provide some indication of the kind of spaces offered by the mobile phone, on the one hand, and by the everyday lives of transnational Filipino families, on the other hand.

The space of the mobile phone

Pertierra (2006) provides an instructive, if abstract, articulation of the characteristics of the space of the mobile phone. He argues that its empowering quality lies in how it can allow for a hybrid form of communication that combines the characteristics of both speech (i.e., calling) and writing (i.e., text messaging). It enables one to connect to others (a) immediately but also reflectively; (b) informally but also authoritatively; and (c) in a manner that is engaged but also detached. In so doing, it affords people the possibility of saying things that cannot usually be said face to face. More specific to the migrant experi- ence, Paragas (2009) claims that another important characteristic of the space of the mobile phone is how it can serve as a transnational communicative bridge. By promoting temporal and spatial simultaneity, it allows migrants to negotiate the divergent social worlds of their home and host countries. According to Madianou and Miller (2011a), this has actu- ally made the decision to migrate or to extend one's migration easier for certain people.

But then again, some characteristics of the space of the mobile phone can also be disempowering. For one, it tends to '[discourage] deep and extended conversations in favor of immediate and often ritualized exchanges' (Pertierra, 2006: 11). So while it can increase the breadth of human connections, it does not necessarily increase the depth of these. This is why transnational family relations via the mobile phone can sometimes end up being a mere tool to maintain the illusion of co-presence, rather than a way to deepen familial bonds (Madianou and Miller, 2011a). The other thing is that whatever its affordances are, the space of the mobile phone will always be limited by the realities of everyday life (Goggin, 2006). This claim is, in fact, fleshed out in recent discussions of mobile phones in the context of the lives of transnational Filipino families (e.g., Aguilar et al., 2009; Madianou and Miller, 2011a; Paragas, 2009; Parreñas, 2005).

It is important to note that the studies above have not yet taken into account the impact of recent technological developments in mobile telephony, most especially the rise of the so-called smartphones. Looking more and more like mobile computers, these devices now have a plethora of functions, such as push mail, mobile web browsing, social networking site applications, and the like. But then again, most Filipinos today still use the mobile phone primarily for calling and text messaging because they find smartphones and/or the service fees needed to use their more advanced features too costly (Mendes et al., 2007).

The exercise of conjugal power in the context of the Filipino family

According to Medina (2001: 161), conjugal power is a 'dominance-deference pattern [that] develops during the course of the couple's daily interaction'. This can be male-dominated (patriarchal), female-dominated (matriarchal) or egalitarian, depending on how the husband and the wife negotiate the different decision-making spheres in the family. Most of the early works on Filipino families describe its conjugal power relations as egalitarian (e.g., Fox, 1961; Mendez et al., 1984). Recent scholarship has argued otherwise, however. Eviota (1992), for one, asserts that an egalitarian relationship between males and females is not plausible in a society where there are rigid distinctions between gender roles. Mulder (1997) agrees with this. He says that it is true that Filipino fathers and mothers are expected to work hand in hand and exercise their parenting duties in a complementary manner. But at the same time, they are also expected to uphold their dichotomous roles. On the one hand, fathers are to be the *haligi ng tahanan* (foundation of the home), who are the breadwinners and disciplinarians of the family. On the other hand, mothers are to be the *ilaw ng tahanan* (light of the home), who are the homemakers and nurturers of the family.

Central to this article is Medina's (2001) argument that to understand the power relations between the fathers and the mothers, one needs to examine two key things. One is the manner in which fathers and mothers negotiate the allocation of parental tasks. Specifically, one is to probe how they influence or command their family members to achieve their desired results. Second is the way that they negotiate their decisions about the financial, moral, religious, educational, or health concerns of their family members. Specifically, one is to look into which parent can command more of the relevant resources – intellectual, emotional, financial, and the like – that will allow them to wield greater influence over whatever issue is on hand.

In the case of transnational families, fathers and mothers are forced to reconstitute some of the gender roles assigned to them. But the tremendous pressure exerted by the dominant social discourses about traditional parenting means that they also need to put effort into holding on to their previous roles and into maintaining their established ways of dealing with their family. The tension between these two opposing forces inevitably alters the dynamics of their conjugal power relations. In order to see how the mobile phone figures in these transformations, we now share the data we have gathered in a research project that spans almost two years. The data are drawn from our in-depth interviews with ten pairs of left-behind fathers and children from mother-away families in Metropolitan Manila (see Tables 2 and 3). With the exception of two families who are from the lower-middle socio- economic bracket, they are all from the lower socio-economic bracket and, as such, rely heavily on the mobile phone as their main means of transnational communication.

From August 2008 to May 2009, we visited the homes of and conducted life story interviews with ten pairs of left-behind fathers and children. During these interview sessions, we focused primarily on two key themes: (a) who assumed the role of the breadwinner, homemaker, disciplinarian, and nurturer and (b) how the characteristics of

the mobile phone mattered in the processes of task allocation and decision-making (cf. Goggin, 2006; Medina, 2001; Paragas, 2009; Pertierra, 2006). As we remained in touch with seven of these ten families, we visited them again in June 2010. We checked whether (a) the centrality of mobile calling and texting had been displaced by the added connectivity functions of newer mobile phones and (b) whether the mobile phone itself had been displaced by newer communication technologies. It turned out these had not happened yet.

Table 2.1. Profile of the left-behind fathers and children.

FAMILY	FATHER/AGE	FATHER'S OCCUPATION	CHILD/AGE	OTHER CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY/ AGE
Delfin	Berting (55)	Tricycle driver	Charm (22)	2 (16 and 20)
Montaño	Noah (53)	Industrial engineer	Joshua (18)	1 (23)
Cordova	Francis (38)	School bus driver	CJ (16)	2 (6 and 9)
San Juan	Eddie (50)	Self-employed public transport van driver	Janina (22)	2 (16 and 27)
Tumulak	Dennis (39)	School bus driver	Ron-Ron (18)	3 (10, 13, and 15)
Lerio	Jessie (45)	Tricycle driver	Mike (18)	1 (14)
Osamis	Arnulfo (39)	Mechanic	Elsie (15)	3 (8, 14, 17)
Santos	Hermie (49)	Construction worker	Jerson (20)	2 (23, 24)
Viri	Jackie (39)	Self-employed cab driver	Philip (16)	2 (10, 19)
Bulusan	Fred (48)	Family driver	Sheryl (19)	1 (13)

Table 2.2. Profile of the migrant mothers.

FAMILY	MOTHER/AGE	MOTHER'S OCCUPATION	MOTHER'S CURRENT LOCATION	YEARS AS A MIGRANT WORKER
Delfin	Armanda (49)	Caregiver	Italy	3 years
Montaño	Leonie (51)	Nurse	Saudi Arabia	22 years
Cordova	Lotlot (37)	Domestic helper	Hong Kong	3 years
San Juan	Nora (46)	Caregiver	USA	2 years
Tumulak	Sarah (36)	Domestic helper	Hong Kong	12 years
Lerio	Fely (39)	Domestic helper	Singapore	5 years

FAMILY	MOTHER/AGE	MOTHER'S OCCUPATION	MOTHER'S CURRENT LOCATION	YEARS AS A MIGRANT WORKER
Osamis	Sally (36)	Domestic helper	USA	4 years
Santos	Claire (47)	Domestic helper	Hong Kong	3 years
Viri	Jenna (40)	Nursing Assistant	Canada	4 years
Bulusan	Vicky (45)	Caregiver	USA	3 years

The mobile phone and the reconstitution of the Filipino household

In light of the discussion above, the data we shall share will focus primarily on how the mobile phone matters in how the left-behind fathers and migrant mothers exercise their conjugal power according to the task allocation and decision making involved in the four key parenting roles that Medina (2001) identifies: being the breadwinner, homemaker, disciplinarian, and nurturer. Our findings consistently point to the importance of the technology as regards the parents' attempt to assert power in areas not traditionally assigned to them. However, these also reveal the significance of the technology in how the parents struggle to hold on to their power in those areas traditionally assigned to them.

On being the breadwinner

Arguably the most talked-about gender role deviation in transnational families is how migrant mothers become the family's primary provider. As Parreñas (2005) argues, it is one of the most significant sources for the prevailing 'dismal view of transnational families', since it is said to hinder mothers from properly caring for their children. It is interesting then that all the left-behind fathers and children we have interviewed hold very strong convictions that the departure of the mothers has been necessary for the survival of their families. A case in point is Hermie, who admits that the part-time nature of being a construction worker constantly undermines his ability to provide adequately for his family. As his son, Jerson, opines, 'If we were to solely rely on Papa, then we'd just be eating every other day.' There is also Noah, whose family is far from being as desperate as Hermie's. As an engineer for a local manufacturing firm, he actually takes home a salary that is enough to classify his family as lower-middle class. Still, he finds himself resigned to the fact that, by himself, he cannot give his family the quality of life that they want. He says that if his wife had not been working as a nurse in Saudi Arabia for the past 21 years, it would not have been possible for his children to study medicine and engineering in two of the most prestigious universities in Manila. Even his son, Joshua, affirms this, saying, 'Without my mother's monthly remittance, I don't think I'll have enough money to buy food at our cafeteria. It's expensive, you know. And then there are all those books to photocopy. And the materials for our never-ending school projects.'

Despite the left-behind family members' avowed necessity of the departure of the mothers, the mothers' crossing over to the role of provider tends to be very bruising to the fathers' egos. And the mobile phone appears to be central to this experience. Many fathers share that their wives 'abuse' mobile phone calls, as they use them to ensure that the money

they send home does not go to waste. Fred laments the fact that towards the end of every month, his wife calls him to ask for a complete accounting of all the family's expenses. He claims that he needs to recite everything he has bought, beginning from the time that his wife's previous remittance arrived. If he is not able to do this properly, he finds himself accused of wanton spending. He says, 'When that thing rings, it does not matter what time it is or where I am. I have to answer. And I have to answer well.' Most of the fathers also say that text messaging has been a double-edged sword in discussions about the family budget. On the one hand, it allows them a means of communication that lessens the shame of a husband asking – and at times begging – for money from his wife. But on the other hand, it also takes away all the vocal cues that might indicate that their primary concern is not the money, but the welfare of their children. As Dennis explains,

'[My wife and I] always fight because of texting. She keeps on saying that every time I text her, there is nothing else I talk about except financial problems ... But sometimes, the only thing I want is for her to show some sympathy. It can be very overwhelming when you're alone, you know.'

With that said, the fathers also find some affordances of the mobile phone useful in thwarting the new-found power of the mother. Although it is a weak form of resistance, one strategy they use is to delay answering their wives' phone calls and text messages. Berting does this, using his job as a tricycle driver as an excuse for being unable to answer. His daughter, Charm, says that he does not really earn much from his job, but Berting says that it at least gives him time to compose his answers to his wife. The job also allows him to maintain some dignity, since it is a reminder that he is not completely dependent on his wife. Most of the other fathers think along these lines. Another benefit of the fathers' delaying tactics is that they serve to diffuse tension in times when tempers run high. As Dennis recalls, there are instances when his wife accuses him of throwing away money on gambling. This is something that he vehemently denies and, consequently, finds offensive. He nev- ertheless avoids getting into a fight with her because she is their family's main provider. 'I just don't mind her,' he says. 'But I eventually reply when my head gets cooler.'

On being the homemaker

Although homemaking is usually thought to be the domain of women (Eviota, 1992), a few of the fathers claim that it is nothing new to them. Eddie is even very proud of this. He says that he has always been the one in charge of cleaning the house and cooking for the family, even before his wife became a caregiver in the United States. He explains,

'I think I'm an obsessive compulsive. I clean the house because I'm never satisfied with how other people would clean it. I cook because my wife isn't a great cook. I do all these things because I enjoy what I'm doing.'

His daughter, Janina, affirms this by saying, 'Daddy's more like a mommy than mommy is.' Eddie, however, is more the exception than the rule.

Most of the other fathers are like Dennis, who shares that he has difficulties doing tasks that he labels as 'pambabae (for women)'. He thinks that as a man, he is ill equipped with

homemaking skills and has had to learn them along the way. Arnulfo believes as much, saying, ‘Ask all my relatives and they’ll tell you how much of a handyman I am. How can I not be? I’m a mechanic! But doing the laundry, ironing clothes, cooking meals ... my wife does those things better.’ Moreover, many of them claim that household chores get in the way of their jobs. Noah narrates that because he needs to help the children prepare for school, he has to wake up at six in the morning even if his work at the office actually starts at nine. He also has to make sure to cook dinner before leaving for work so that his two boys will have something to eat when they get home. Jackie also says that his schedule as a cab driver is dependent on his children’s schedules in school. ‘I have to be with them before they leave and I have to return home in time for dinner,’ he shares.

To lessen the burden of their husbands, the mothers repeatedly ask the children to help with the household chores. As many of the children narrate, their mothers often send them text messages that urge them to do their assigned tasks, such as doing the laundry, mopping the floor, and washing the dishes. The mothers also make what Jackie’s son, Philip, labels as ‘ambush calls’. By this he means their penchant for making surprise calls to check if they are actually helping out at home.

What appears to be happening then is that the mobile phone simultaneously helps both the fathers and the mothers perform the role of a homemaker. The calls and text messages allow the mothers to have a say in how the house is run. At the same time, these also ease the burden on the fathers, who do take on the role of managing their homes – if grudgingly at times – while continuing to insist on the importance of their own jobs.

On being the disciplinarian

Despite the continued physical presence of the fathers in their homes, the departure of the mothers significantly undermines their capacity to discipline their children. The predominant perception of fathers as the rational and firm voice of authority in the household (Medina, 2001) does not seem to be shared by the children in many mother-away families. The most extreme example that we have come across is Berting’s experience with Charm, who is the eldest among all his children. According to him, they got into a huge fight because he reprimanded her for talking back to her uncle. He says that Charm snapped back at him by calling him a mere ‘palamunin (mouth to feed),’ a term that most Filipinos would consider highly derogatory. It seems that because left-behind fathers like Berting are no longer the primary breadwinners of their family, many of their children have gained the courage to go against them.

To address this problem, many of the fathers turn to their wives. In moments when their children make small transgressions, they inform the migrant mothers through text messaging. Jessie recalls doing this every time his son, Mike, goes home beyond his 10.00 p.m. curfew. His wife would then be the one to make a call to their son. This has spared him many a confrontation with their son, whom he claims has increasingly grown irritable with him. In moments when their children commit major mistakes, many fathers resort to the more extreme measure of calling their wives or asking their wives to call

them. As Berting claims, sensitive matters – like his fight with Charm – could never be correctly relayed through texting, as these would inevitably be misunderstood. ‘At least in a call, I get to explain my actions more clearly,’ he says. ‘I think maybe because I hear her voice, I can somewhat imagine her emotions at that time and so I get to adjust my arguments according to how I think she is feeling.’ Meanwhile, Hermie tells us that calls emphasize how urgent the situation is. He observes that while text messages can be left unnoticed, calls demand immediate attention. This is why he rarely calls his wife. ‘I do not want my wife getting nervous all the time. She has too much on her plate already.’

But if the fathers can use the mobile phone in asking the mothers for help as regards disciplining their children, the technology can also work against them. This is because children also use the mobile phone to get the sympathy of their mothers. A lot of the children have said that whenever they feel that their fathers scold them unjustly, they send their mothers text messages about it. And many times, the mothers would call the fathers and chide them for wrongfully reprimanding their children. Fred narrates that there was a time when he scolded his daughter, Sheryl, for not asking permission before going out on a date. He admits that he might have been too harsh on his daughter, which was why she sent her mother a text message right away. He says that his wife went ballistic on the phone, saying, ‘Your child is a girl! You have to be more careful because girls are sensitive! Don’t you know that?!’ He remembers being unable to do anything but listen quietly while trying hard to control his flaring temper. Francis tells of a similar story of receiving an angry call from his wife. Apparently, she found out that he made CJ – his eldest child and his wife’s favorite – do the dishes and sweep the floor. Unlike Fred though, Francis stood his ground, arguing, ‘[CJ] should learn how to do these things. Would you want him to grow up and not be able to do anything? ... I know what I’m doing!’ Evidently, the fathers feel slighted when the mothers interfere in those times that they choose to impose their own brand of discipline on their children.

On being the nurturer

Most of the fathers claim that it is important for them to establish a nurturing home environment for their children, even if this role – which includes providing emotional and spiritual guidance – is usually attributed to mothers (Medina, 2001). This is especially true when they have sons or daughters who have difficulty opening up to their mothers via the mobile phone. As some of the children claim, texting is not conducive to having real conversations, let alone real relationships, with their mother. Eddie’s son Joshua says that there are times when he texts his mother ‘I miss you’ only because he feels obliged to make her happy. He says that in truth, he never really misses his mother anymore because he has become used to her absence. In a similar manner, Arnulfo’s daughter, Elsie, says that she rarely finds herself motivated to share her life stories with her mother. She explains that having to punch in all of that through a mobile phone’s keypad is extremely tiresome. So in the end, the only messages she gets to send to her mother are her requests for things, like shoes, chocolates, and the like. Meanwhile, Arnulfo ends up being her confidante. ‘Yes, he knows even my crushes!’ Elsie brags.

There are cases, though, when the children do want to be close to their mothers more than to their fathers, but find the mobile phone a hindrance to achieving this. For instance, Francis' son CJ relates that he finds it too corny to say 'I love you' to his mother. He explains that saying such things – whether face-to-face or via phone conversations – makes him feel very awkward. So the only way he gets to express this is through the more impersonal medium of text messaging, which he thinks is unable to capture what he truly feels. Then, there is Dennis's son, Ron-Ron, who says that he wants to open up to his mother but cannot do so primarily because of the lack of privacy at home. As he does not have a personal mobile phone or a personal computer, he inevitably has to talk to his mother in the presence of his other relatives. For fear of people eavesdropping on him, what he ends up saying then are generic things that have nothing to do with what he really wants to talk about.

Finally, there are those children whose first instinct remains to be getting in touch with – or in this case, send a text to – their mothers, especially when it comes to the most important events in their lives. In these instances, the mobile phone contributes to the continued need for mothers to perform their nurturing roles, while at the same time leav- ing the fathers almost completely in the cold. As Berting narrates,

'My children open up to their mother more than to me. They all have cell phones and they always text their mother. They don't even tell me what they have talked about. For instance, I wouldn't have known that Charm had been sick if it hadn't been for my wife. Imagine! She opted to call her mother who was a thousand miles away in Italy, instead of me who was just here in Mandaluyong.'

Fred seems to be in this same situation, as he appears to be totally unaware of the things that happen in the life of his children. Indeed, his daughter, Sheryl, says that she usually asks her mother to call her so that they can share stories about her love life. 'My father won't understand anyway,' she says.

Conclusions

This article sought to explore how mobile phones might matter in the way conjugal power relations are exercised in the context of mother-away Filipino families. From the stories shared by the ten pairs of left-behind fathers and children, it is clear that the pluralized experience of space that the technology allows leads to an equally pluralized experience of relationships (Moores, 2004). On the one hand, the mobile phone enables migrant mothers and left-behind fathers to reconfigure their parenting roles in light of the chal- lenges brought about by their transnational family set-up. On the other hand, it also allows these mothers and fathers some way of holding on to aspects of traditional parenting roles that the dominant discourses in Philippine society still strongly prescribe. It is perhaps because of these possibilities that some have argued that it can mitigate the impact of migration on transnational family relations (cf. Madianou and Miller, 2011a; Uy-Tioco, 2007). We do not necessarily disagree with this view. We contend, however, that the greater consequence of this doubling of place might be more worrisome.

The data we have gathered suggest that although the mobile phone can contribute to increasing cooperation between left-behind fathers and migrant mothers, it more often than not amplifies the complexity of their already complicated conjugal power relations. To be sure, the technology allows them to help each other out in fulfilling their new par- enting roles. The fathers most especially get a lot of help from the mothers as regards nurturing and homemaking. But then again, it is also the fathers who tend to suffer the greater social stigma that comes with transgressing the traditionally gendered parenting roles in Philippine society.

The mothers are certainly able to use their transnational mothering rituals via the mobile phone to parlay accusations that they might have abandoned their children (Parreñas, 2005; Uy-Tioco, 2007). It does help ease the ambivalent feelings that often come with their decision to leave their family and to continue doing so (Madianou and Miller, 2011a). Unfortunately, the fathers cannot really use the technology to deflect criticisms that they have become under de saya (a henpecked husband) (Medina, 2001). For one, it is the mothers – and not them – who have the economic capacity to dictate the extent of their transnational communications (cf. Madianou and Miller, 2011a). This is very clear in how the mothers tend to maximize the mobile phone as a tool of surveillance and how, in turn, the fathers tend to use its affordances that allow them a limited repertoire of 'weapons of the weak,' such as delaying their responses to incoming calls and texts (cf. Foucault, 1977; Scott, 1985). The other thing is that like other new media spaces, the space created by this technology is still embedded in and, very importantly, circumscribed by the wider context of everyday life (cf. Miller, 2011). Since the mothers are farther away from the Philippines and the fathers are right in the middle of it, they would necessarily experience the judgments of their 'masculine society' (Hofstede, 2001) about their changed parenting roles with different degrees of intensity.

The mobile phone thus tends to build resentment in many of the left-behind fathers. This certainly contributes to increasing the strain present in the already difficult relationships between the spouses in mother-away families. So while it is true that the technology can mitigate some of the effects of migration by providing more frequent and instantaneous communication, it cannot shield the fathers and mothers from the tremendous difficulties of having to deal with two opposing forces: the changed realities in a transnational Filipino family and the traditional expectations of Philippine society. As such, this article sides with recent works (e.g., Madianou and Miller, 2011a; Paragas, 2009) that aim to provide a coun- terbalance to the optimistic discourses that the Philippine government and the leading Philippine mobile phone corporations propagate about mobile calling and texting.

Future studies can expand on this work in at least two ways. Those who are interested in its media aspect might want to go beyond one of the limits of this research: its focus on the mobile phone. Other works can explore whether and how the mobile phone might matter to the conjugal power relations in transnational families who have moved more deeply into the 'polymedia' (Madianou and Miller, 2011c). In the Philippine context, this would most probably mean looking at those families who can actually afford multiple media, namely those from the middle, upper-middle and upper socio-economic classes. Meanwhile, those who are interested in this work's migration aspect might want to start moving beyond

examining conjugal power relations in the context of transnational families. They might instead want to turn their attention to the context of post-migration. Specifically, they can probe into whether and how the return of the migrant mothers would mean the eventual restoration or permanent alteration of the conjugal power relations with the Filipino family (cf. Ochi, 2005; Sri Tharan, 2010).

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