Comments on Minu Thomas' and Sun Sun Lim's 'Migrant workers' use of ICTs for interpersonal communication - the experience of female domestic workers in Singapore'.

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First of all I'd like to thank Minu Thomas and Sun Sun Lim for the opportunity to engage with their work and John for inviting me to comment.

The paper explores migrant workers' ICT use for interpersonal communication drawing on research with 20 live-in domestic workers from India and the Philippines working in Singapore. I wish to say that this is a great topic, but I am aware of my own bias given that my ongoing research focuses on a very similar theme: together with my collaborator, Daniel Miller, we have been studying whether the explosion of opportunities in new communications technologies has transformed care and intimacy among transnational families and in particular Caribbean and Filipino migrants in the UK and their left-behind families. This is a three-year multi-sited ethnography in London, Cambridge, the Philippines and Trinidad which is funded by the ESRC and now entering its final year.

Personal enthusiasms aside, it is clear to see the significance of Thomas' and Lim's project. Migration and ICTs are two of the tales of our times and their convergence has potential consequences for a number of areas ranging from the welfare of migrants, their integration in host societies, their social and economic capital and their ability to maintain relationships of love and care with their left-behind families. There is already a growing literature on these themes (reviewed by the authors), but clearly more research is needed given the variation of migratory experiences and the relentlessly evolving nature of new communication technologies. This article represents a welcome addition in that respect.

What struck me immediately is that this paper is a reminder of the sharp differences live-in domestics experience depending on the social and cultural context in which they work. For example, the UK situation is markedly different with more freedoms and rights granted to domestic workers, although, of course, it is possible to come across stories of abuse and exploitation here, too.

I very much welcome the study's comparative perspective, which is one of its strengths. However, I feel that the authors could have made more with this opportunity; for example, a systematic comparison between the two groups would have been very enlightening given that there are very striking differences both in terms of ICT access and educational status as Table 1 suggests. For example, while only one of the Indian participants had access to a computer (I assume that also means internet access?), four of the Filipinas used a pc which is a fourfold increase and significant even for such a small sample. The Filipinas are also more educated with high school being the minimum qualification and five of the study's participants having University degrees. Based on my current research this is a pattern typical for UK-based Filipinas and Filipino migration more generally with migrants often experiencing a downward social mobility which is only compensated by higher income due to the wage differentials (see also Parrenas 2001). Conversely, only one of the Indian participants had a University degree, whilst three had only been through some primary education. The paper does not discuss these differences and whether they translate in variations of ICT consumption patterns. A comparison of migration patterns would have also been welcome. Underlying all these questions is a need for a clearer justification as to why a focus on these two groups - and not Indonesian domestics, for instance?

Another striking pattern in the sample cutting across the two populations is that women seem to be divided between those who have been abroad for long periods of time (up to 19 years, presumably in the case of Filipinas made up of a sequence of short-term, renewable contracts) and those who have only been in Singapore for months, or a couple of years. It would be great to know if the length of migration determines variations in ICT consumption? Other contextual information, which would have also been useful to have is how many of these women were single and how many mothers and weather maintaining long distance primary relationships shapes the patterns of ICT use.

What is the situation with irregular migrants in Singapore? This is an issue in the UK. Our interviews with telecoms officials in the Philippines drawing on inbound and outbound call traffic suggest a higher Filipino UK-based population than the one reported in the official statistics (Madianou and Miller in preparation). Are there any undocumented domestic migrants in Singapore and were there any in the sample? I was also wondering whether the reluctance to record the interviews (p.4) was also due to the migrant's status. This matters as lack of legal documents restricts one's movements and thus increases dependence on communication media which has certainly been one of our findings (Madianou and Miller in preparation).

I am intrigued as to why the authors choose the term ritual to discuss the uses of the phone in order to maintain relationships with family members. There may well be something ritualistic about these communications, but this needs further unpacking. Do Sumanthi's marital rows over the phone (page 6) constitute performances of ritual, or are they a communicative strategy - or even the result of misunderstandings which inevitably occur in the process of mediated communication (as opposed to situations of co-presence)?

Even though the authors recognise the empowering potential of ICTs and the mobile phone in particular, they are careful not to paint an entirely rosy picture noting that communication can also be a burden, a finding that concurs with ours. To what extent would the authors agree with the argument that migration has not reversed the gender hierarchies in the Philippines and mobile phones actually tie women to the domestic sphere (Parrenas 2005)?

Although the paper discusses the economic conditions of ICT availability and consumption in Singapore it would have been helpful to have been given some context about the political and economic structure of telecommunications in the Philippines and India. Such a perspective would throw light to the reasons why ICTs can also be experienced as a burden, and also explain the dominance of the mobile phone.

I am fascinated about the continuing importance of letter-writing which the authors allude to and I would love to hear more about this. How does letter-writing compare with the new technologies? In what context is letter-writing preferred today over a phone call? We have found that some of our most poignant material comes from people's memories of writing and receiving letters (Madianou and Miller forthcoming) and it would be great to hear more about the survival of this genre.

I applaud the paper's commitment to contribute to policy, highlighting the applicability of such research which can potentially lead to an improvement of the subjects' quality of life. I am wondering why the internet is largely absent from these recommendations: for example, the authors note that 'contracts between employers and migrant workers in general should have clear provision for the employee' right to communication and specifically, mobile communications'. Although it is understandable that the authors' research points to the clear dominance of the mobile phone, I would have thought that encouraging internet-based communication would help minimise costs of

communication which emerge as significant (according to Table 2). For example, amongst our London and Cambridge participants we have a few who have been able to use their employers' pc to chat with their families in the Philippines or with their own networks in the UK. We have also witnessed the empowering potential of internet-based communication as we have worked with women who acquired digital literacy during our fieldwork (through the Centre for Filipinos in London for instance which provides IT classes every Sunday). If the reason why the internet is not as present is its low penetration in the countries of origin then this needs to be more clearly addressed in the discussion - also as there are differentiations within these countries (see earlier point about economic analysis).

Finally, I would like to ask the authors if the study's findings point, however tentatively, to a wider thesis about the relationship between migration and ICTs in the context of interpersonal communication. I realise this is a rather ambitious question, but one which we may want to address in the context of this discussion over the next few days.

Thanks again to Minu Thomas and Sun Sun Lim. I enjoyed reading the paper and look forward to the discussion. Over to you.

References

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