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Transnational Families and the Family nexus: Perspectives of Indonesian and Filipino Children Left Behind by Migrant Parent(s)

Elspeth Graham
University of St Andrews, UK

Lucy P Jordan
University of Southampton, UK

Brenda SA Yeoh
National University of Singapore, Singapore

Theodora Lam
National University of Singapore, Singapore

Maruja Asis
Scalabrini Migration Center, Philippines

Su kamdi
Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia

Abstract

As a significant supplier of labour migrants, Southeast Asia presents itself as an important site for the study of children in transnational families who are growing up separated from at least one migrant parent and sometimes cared for by 'other mothers'. Through the often-neglected voices of left-behind children, this paper investigates the impact of parental migration and the resulting reconfiguration of care arrangements on the subjective well-being of migrants' children in two Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia and the Philippines. We theorise the child's position in the transnational family nexus through the framework of the 'care triangle', representing interactions between three subject groups – 'left-behind' children, non-migrant parents/other carers, and migrant parent/s. Using both quantitative (from 1,010 households) and qualitative (from 32 children) data from a study of Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia (CHAMPSEA), we examine relationships within the caring spaces of both home and transnational spaces. The interrogation of different dimensions of care reveals the importance of contact with parents (both migrant and non-migrant) to subjective child well-being, and the diversity of experiences and intimacies among children in the two study countries.

INTRODUCTION

International circuits of labour migration play an important role in the globalised economies of the 21st century, creating a complex web of connections and transactions between the global south and the global north. Labour migrants from Southeast Asia typically take up short-term contracts in the wealthier counties of the region and beyond which limit their rights of residence in host countries. Contracts may be renewed or new contracts taken up after brief visits home. Their experiences of sojourning and displacement (Lorente, et al. 2005) are bounded by the uncertainties of 'return' and are producing new ways of realizing family across transnational spaces (Yeoh et al., 2005). Indeed, in the light of rapid economic and demographic change across Asia triggered by the recent round of capitalist globalization, the 'family' – a form of living arrangement which is highly variable across cultures and societies in Asia – has been undergoing structural changes related to trends such as rapid ageing, declining fertility and family sizes, and increased migration. Notably, migration flows of unprecedented volume and complexity within and beyond the Asian region have become one of the main drivers of contemporary social change in Asia, giving rise to increasing numbers of migrants and their (non-migrant) family members living lives at 'the intersections of different spaces, …. different times and different speeds' (Yeoh, 2009: 1, quoting Abbas, 1997: 41). In this context, intimate social relations are stretched across distance, infused by imaginaries of place transformed by absence and longing. For the migrants, 'home' takes on new meanings as a site of connection held in the imagination but distanced from daily life in which the unfamiliar becomes familiar and keeping the family present is a considerable challenge. Migrant parents in particular may struggle to maintain emotional ties to young children who have remained 'at home'. While the now considerable literature on international labour migration tends to isolate the experience of migrants from the impact of migration on their families who remain in sending communities, this paper conceptualises migrants as embedded in a transnational family nexus that is constituted through continuously negotiated relationships among those who have migrated and other family members 'left behind'. While family practices and relationships play out differently on a more mobile stage, we argue that in

many instances the notion of 'being family' continues to hold significance in the face of geographical separation, 'even as the desire to go on being a family under such conditions is continually reworked' (Yeoh, 2009: 1). This paper explores the transnational family nexus, or set of intimate relationships at the heart of 'being family', from the perspective of left-behind children. First, however, we examine how family life is reconfigured by overseas labour migration.

One theme that emerges strongly from past research is the gendered nature of both the migrant's experience and the impacts of migration on those left-behind in sending communities. The migration of male heads of household, for example, has been found to lead to reconfigurations of both productive and reproductive labour within transnational families as women and children perform tasks traditionally performed by men (Hugo, 2002; Xiang, 2007; Asis, 2003). Male migration may also result in non-migrant women experiencing more financial hardships (Smith-Estelle and Gruskin, 2003), difficulties with disciplining their children (Battistella and Conaco, 1998; Dwiyanto and Keban, 1997; Hugo, 2000), lower access to food (Smith-Estelle and Gruskin, 2003) and increased loneliness and isolation (Skeldon, 2003; Gardner, 1995). However, other studies have found more positive outcomes for women, with wives of migrant men accorded greater autonomy and self-confidence, as well as improved social status (Donnan and Werbner, 1991; Hadi, 2001).

The migration of women may be seen as an even greater challenge to traditional gender discourses, although the extent to which it is transformative appears to be limited (Parreñas, 2010). The increasing feminization of overseas labour migration in recent decades has prompted anxieties over a 'crisis of care' when women and mothers leave (Parreñas, 2005b), showing how gendered thinking concerning parental identities and roles endures even in the face of potential disruptions when migrant mothers become breadwinners for the family, and fathers and children are left behind. Studies have noted the largely negative verdict about the consequences of family separation in the realm of public opinion in the Philippines where "(m)any stories, rumors and speculations circulate about philandering husbands or wives, spendthrift children and children becoming wayward" (ECMI-CBCP/AOS-Manila, SMC and OWWA, 2004: 3). According to this report, while the absence

of any one parent will undeniably create displacement, disruptions and changes in caregiving arrangements within the family, the migration of mothers requires greater adjustments in caregiving roles than does the migration of fathers. Migrant mothers themselves may assume dual roles as both breadwinners and nurturers from a distance (Hondagneu-Soleto and Avila, 1997), while suffering feeling of loss over their separation from husbands and children. The sense of loss experienced by other family members may also be greater when a mother goes overseas to work. In the Philippines, as Parreñas (2008: 1062) points out, "the traditional gender ideology of separate spheres constructs fathers as 'pillars' and mothers as 'lights'" of the home. 'Pillars' and 'lights' make different contributions, one providing for the family and the other nurturing the family, but it is mothers who are seen as holding the family together. When fathers migrate away from 'home' for work, their children perceive this to be an extension of their breadwinner role, while viewing their mothers as being forced to work abroad because of poverty (Parreñas, 2005a). Moreover, while migrant mothers develop strategies for nurturing from a distance, Parreñas (2008: 1058) argued that migrant fathers do not adjust their fathering practices to accommodate distance but rather "perform a heightened version of conventional fathering", demonstrated through the display of authority, and thus maintain gender-normative views of parenting.

Although the gendering of family roles in terms of a patriarchal breadwinning model remains dominant in Southeast Asia, some scholars have argued that the perceived 'crisis of care' may be overdrawn as the adverse social and emotional effects of transnational migration on the health of familial relations are not predetermined. Hugo (2002) noted the key importance of support networks for left-behind families in Indonesia in maintaining resilient family lives in the absence of a parent. Asis (2002) revealed that the majority of Filipino female migrants actively worked to ensure a sense of connection with their children through phone calls and other means of long-distance communication, facilitating the maintenance of intimacy across transnational spaces. The dedication of migrant Filipino mothers in sustaining the relationship with their left-behind children was also apparent in Parreñas' (2005a) work, where mothers continued to keep in close contact with their

children. This cross-border practice of caregiving, or 'long-distance mothering', can be seen as an intensive emotional labour that involves activities of 'multiple burden and sacrifice', spending 'quality time' during brief home visits, and reaffirming the 'other influence and presence' through surrogate figures and regular communication with children (Sobritchea, 2007). However, despite engaging in these activities, migrant mothers often reported feeling a sense of failure in performing this role, especially feeling guilt about not caring for their children while they cared for the children of other women as domestic workers in other countries (Ehrenreich and Hoschschild, 2002). Whatever the costs and triumphs, sustaining the family across distance may already be regarded in itself as a form of active agency and resistance against the circumstances.

When mothers migrate, fathers are assuming 'mothering' roles to a greater or lesser degree, and this may be an increasing trend in some parts of Asia where nuclear families are becoming more prevalent. Studies from Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka have found that non-migrant fathers do take on more childcare when their wives migrate but there is considerable debate about the extent of their involvement and, in the case of the Philippines, it appears that these 'mothering' roles are often not sustained after mothers return (Afsar, 2005; Chantavich, 2001; Hugo, 2005; Parreñas, 2005b). In Sri Lanka, Gamburd (2000) observed that there was actually more male participation in household and child-rearing tasks than reported, and older concepts of gender roles may be slowly changing (Save the Children, 2006). Pingol's (2001) study of migrant wives and househusbands in the Philippines also provided an account of how fathers may become important providers of care for household and children, and she argued that taking up duties of care becomes a way for these left-behind men to reclaim, as well as to re-invent, their masculinities.

Nevertheless, when fathers take on nurturing roles, other family members often provide additional assistance. Some left-behind families will enlist the help of extended family members (usually female), or even friends, to undertake the main caring and nurturing tasks left vacant by the migrant mother (Gamburd, 2000; Parreñas, 2005a, 2010). The availability of non-parental carers is clearly crucial when both parents leave to work overseas. Studies in many parts of the world have

revealed the importance of these 'other mothers' (Orellana et al., 2001; Schmalzbauer, 2004) in the reconfiguration of care when a mother migrates. Grandmothers, older sisters, aunts and foster carers have thus become key figures in the lives of some left-behind children (Asis and Baggio, 2003; Battistella and Conaco, 1998; Ganepola, 2002; Gardner, 1995; Mendoza, 2004). Hugo (2002) argued that a decisive factor in the Indonesian family's ability to adapt to migration is whether an extended family and kinship structure exists to allow other family members to assume the tasks normally undertaken by the migrant. Whatever the caregiving arrangements in place for left-behind children, they are an important mediating factor in the child's experience of parental migration.

While many scholarly accounts have focused on reconfigurations of family life when mothers migrate overseas from the global south, there is a growing recognition that children and youth have been largely 'written out' of migration studies, and, when included, have often been envisioned as passive dependents. Recent work on children's geographies (e.g. Dobson, 2009; Van Blerk and Barker, 2008) may have restored the child as active subject but has hardly begun to interrogate the socio-spatial nexus of familial intimacies across national borders in different contexts. By foregrounding the perspectives of left-behind children, this paper recognises the agency of children and seeks to theorise their experiences of living in a transnational household within the nexus of familial relations that (re)constitute their care. The relationality of transnational care arrangements is structured within the web of caring relationships among three (or more) main participants: the left-behind child, migrant parent(s), and co-present carer(s). Attending to the diverse socio-spatial practices of 'doing' family in a transnational context allows for the investigation of the impact of transnationalism on children's well-being from multiple perspectives. By conceptualizing the relationships among these three groups of subjects within the 'care triangle'(Figure 1)[1], we are interested in examining the nature of (child) care within transnational families, as well as how care

[1] The term 'care triangle' is used in reference to relationships between Spanish mothers, children and surrogate mothers in Tobio, C. and Gorfinkiel, M.D. (2007).

arrangements are negotiated and transformed through migration processes that are experienced simultaneously but differently by different subjects.

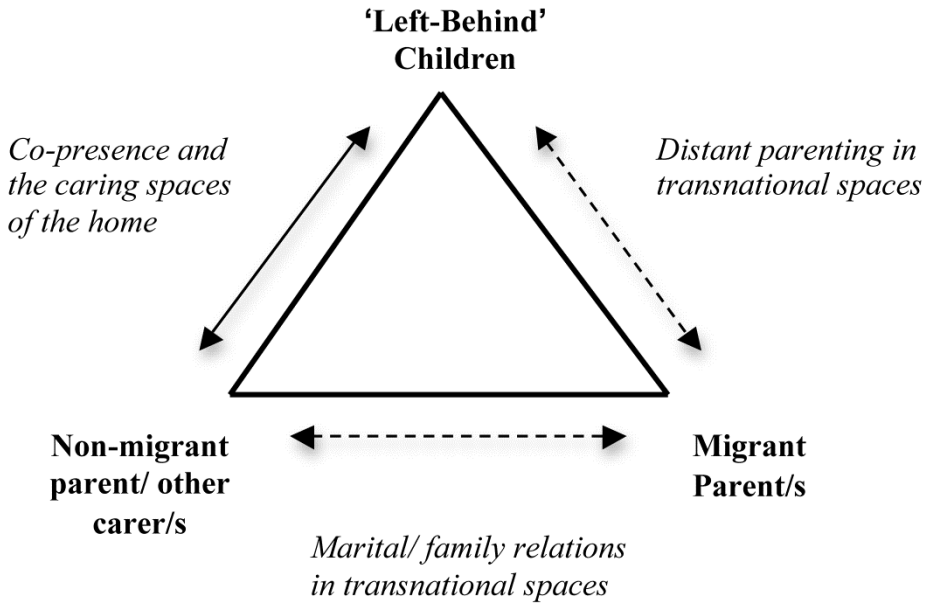

FIGURE 1: The Care Triangle

Each side of the triangle represents a discursive space, as well as a (continuous or transitory) material space, that both constitutes and is constituted by the familial relations of the subject groups. This approach highlights the interrelatedness of the three subject groups as they negotiate the local and transnational exchanges that inform children's experiences of parenting and care. Our investigation of these relationships draws on data we collected in 2008 and 2009 for a cross-country study on Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia (CHAMPSEA). We focus here on children from the Philippines and Indonesia who remained in their home country when one or both of their parents went overseas to work. The Philippines and Indonesia are important 'labour exporting' countries in regional and global contexts where the increasing feminization of overseas migration has led to particular anxieties, enhanced by sensationalist media, about the 'crisis of care' in sending communities (Parreñas, 2002; 2005b). Children are often presumed especially vulnerable to a care deficit when their mother migrates but few studies have interrogated in detail the relationships within the 'care triangle' on which (re)negotiations around childcare depend.

The main aim of this paper is to explore how children understand and experience *being parented* from a distance, as well as receiving care from those who are spatially, but perhaps not emotionally, 'closer to home'. We therefore interrogate aspects of the relationships within the 'care triangle' from the often neglected perspective of left-behind children in the context of children's subjective assessments of their own well-being. Our aim is to initiate discussion rather than to provide a comprehensive overview of the web of connections and differences encapsulated in the care triangle, a point we will return to towards the end of the paper.

After introducing the children in the CHAMPSEA study, attention is focused on two sets of relationships, representing two axes of the 'care triangle'. First, we examine the relations between children and their spatially proximate caregivers. Children often seek physical expression of love and affection from a co-present carer and their relationship with whoever is caring for their daily needs is central to their experience of 'family'. Second, we explore relationships between children and their migrant parent(s). By interrogating these different dimensions of care using evidence from both quantitative surveys and semi-structured interviews, we begin to reveal the diversity of arrangements and intimacies that constitute care for left-behind children and to contribute to understanding how these relationships impact on child well-being.

INDONESIAN AND FILIPINO CHILDREN IN THE CHAMPSEA STUDY

CHAMPSEA is a mixed-method study investigating the health and well-being of children under 12 years of age in Indonesia, The Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Qualifying households were those with a child in one of two age groups: 3, 4 and 5 year olds (pre-school/ young children) and 9, 10 and 11 year olds (primary school-aged/ older children). Both non-migrant households, where both parents were co-resident with the child, and transnational households, where one or both of the child's parents were international labour migrants, were included in the sample[2]. This allows

[2] Only children of currently married parents were selected for the study. The sample thus excludes single and divorced parents, as well as parents who were internal migrants.

us to use children in non-migrant households as a comparison group. In phase 1, structured surveys were administered to several members of c.1,000 households in each country during 2008, including the primary school-aged children themselves. In phase 2, follow-up qualitative interviews with around 50 of the children's principal caregivers in each country were undertaken in 2009, as well as semi-structured interviews with 16 of the older children in both Indonesia and the Philippines who were aged 10, 11 and 12 years at the time of interview. All interviews were conducted in local languages and all participants gave informed consent, or assent in the case of children. Interviewers were constantly mindful of ethical concerns[3], especially those that entail working with children (see Skelton, 2008). In particular, interviewers were careful to protect and respect children's rights and opinions, interviewing them within sight of an adult household member. An activity involving the 'protection umbrella' (adapted from Beasley, Bessell, Ennew and Waterson, 2005) was used to help put children at ease during the qualitative interview. Survey questions were translated and back-translated, and the meanings were tested in a pilot study to ensure comparability across language groups.

For the purposes of the following discussion, we draw on both selected survey data from the primary school-aged children collected during phase 1 and the semi-structured interviews conducted with a small sub-sample of these children during phase 2. The survey samples for Indonesia and the Philippines each include data for around 500 children. We dropped three case for which there was missing data. Just over half of the children were living in transnational households and the follow-up interviews concentrated mainly on this group (see Table 1).

[3] The project was funded by the Wellcome Trust, UK and ethics approval was obtained from the National University of Singapore, the University of St. Andrews, the Scalabrini Migration Center (Philippines) and the Center for Population and Policy Studies, Gadjah Mada University (Indonesia), as well as appropriate institutes in the other two study countries.

Country	Data type	Non-migrant	Transnational			
		Both parents co-resident	Father migrant	Mother migrant	Both parents migrant	Total
Indonesia	Survey	249	78	150	33	510
Philippines	Survey	245	172	65	17	499
Total		494	250	215	50	1009
Indonesia	Interview	0	7	7	2	16
Philippines	Interview	0	8	8	0	16
Total		0	15	15	2	32

TABLE 1: Composition of CHAMPSEA samples

Traditional notions of parenting and family placing mothers as carers are illustrated by the childcare arrangements for children in non-migrant households. For the great majority of children living with both parents in Indonesia (87.2%) and the Philippines (91.0%), their mother was primarily responsible for their day-to-day care. Further, mothers were the principal carers for even higher percentages (98.7% in Indonesia and 93.6% in the Philippines) of the primary school-aged children with migrant fathers in the CHAMPSEA study. In contrast, caregiving arrangements for children of migrant mothers (and non-migrant fathers) made greater use of non-parental care, although more than half these children in both countries were left in the care of their non-migrant fathers. Grandmothers and diverse others (including aunts, uncles and older sisters and brothers) were the principal carers for a smaller percentage of the samples. In Indonesia, fathers were clearly the dominant group, with only around one in five of the children of migrant mothers being left with non-parental carers.

For the small number of children whose mother and father were both working overseas, care arrangements relied almost entirely on extended family members, with grandmothers being the main ‘substitute’ carers. Just under half of the 33 Indonesian children and the 17 Filipino children in this group had been left in the care of their maternal grandmother. An additional 4 children in Indonesia and 3 children in the Philippines were cared for by their paternal grandmother. Aunts and uncles made up the balance, although two children had been left in the care of an older sibling. Among all the children living in transnational households in the CHAMPSEA samples for the two countries,

non-relatives provided care for only around one percent (1 boy and 2 girls in Indonesia and 3 girls in the Philippines). Overall, female relatives were the principal carers for 86 percent of children with both parents absent. While confirming the importance of 'other *mothers*' (Orellana et al., 2001), this may also reflect the persistence of gendered thinking in care negotiations for these children.

The interviews were conducted in several communities within high out-migration provinces outside the main metropolitan areas. In Indonesia, these were Javanese communities around Tulungagung and Ponorogo in East Java and Sundanese communities around Sukabumi and Tasikmalaya in West Java; in the Philippines, interviews were conducted in Tagalog-speaking communities in selected barangays in the provinces of Laguna and Bulacan. Despite differences in cultural heritage, a bilateral kinship system is customary in all these communities. They also share the common characteristic of being known locally as areas of out-migration and, in places, their built environments are testament to the flows of remittance monies that have been invested in house building projects. While the experiences of children left behind by migrant parents may reveal some common ground, it is important to note that the cultural contexts in which they live differ significantly, not least in terms of the dominant religion. The rhythms of daily life for children in Java are influenced by the practices of Islam, whereas for the majority of Filipino children it is the beliefs and practices of Roman Catholicism that play an important part in their lives. These differences are not the focus of this paper, which seeks to foreground intimate relationships within transnational households, but they need to be kept in mind in so far as they are implicated in family practices. In particular, by inscribing disparate roles for women and men, both religions reinforce gendered discourses on the family and thus perpetuate rather than challenge traditional breadwinner models manifest in public representations. As Velayutham and Wise (2005) argue in their study of migrants from a South Indian village, transnational migration creates a moral economy predicated on discursively constructed ideals of the family, which may operate to reproduce 'tradition'. We can see this reflected in the ways in which caring roles are imagined both in the public domain and private spaces of the transnational family.

Children's Subjective Well-Being

Children, as receivers of care, have their own expectations and experiences of being cared for, as well as understandings of their own well-being. These are revealed not only in their narratives but also in their answers to more structured survey questions. There is growing interest in systematic assessments of the subjective well-being of children and important relationships between personal well-being and family structure have been found in a European context (Bradshaw, Keung, Rees, and Goswami, 2011). To capture the subjective well-being of Indonesian and Filipino children in the CHAMPSEA survey, we make use of two different survey questions. The first question asked: *Now thinking about yourself,* "In general, are you happy or unhappy?" This question was placed at the beginning of the survey before any questions about parents or experiences of transnational family life. The children were asked for responses on a five point scale from very happy to very unhappy. What is remarkable about the distribution of responses within the country samples (which include children who were living in transnational households and those who were living with both parents) is that most children declared themselves either very happy or happy, and proportions in these two categories combined are nearly identical for the Indonesian (81.6%) and Filipino (82.4%) groups.

The second survey question was one of a series designed to gain insight into children's relationships with others by inquiring about seeking support, and asked: "Who would you turn to (talk to) if you were feeling lonely or sad?". Children could answer freely but responses were classified by the interviewer into one of 28 categories. Most represented people, including mother, father, other relatives, teachers and spiritual leaders, but responses such as 'I don't have problems' and 'I would do nothing/ turn to no-one' were also recorded. This last set of responses is of particular interest because it is likely to be indicative of a lack of social support, or at least a reluctance to seek support and reassurance. Only a minority of children across the two countries (14.4%) responded to the question in this way, but in this case there were significant differences between children in Indonesia and the Philippines.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of responses in three aggregated categories for each country across the whole sample (i.e. for children in non-migrant and transnational households combined). The results of a chi-square test (χ^2= 18.15, p<0.001) suggest a significant difference between the countries, with children in Indonesia being less likely to seek social support if they feel sad or lonely.

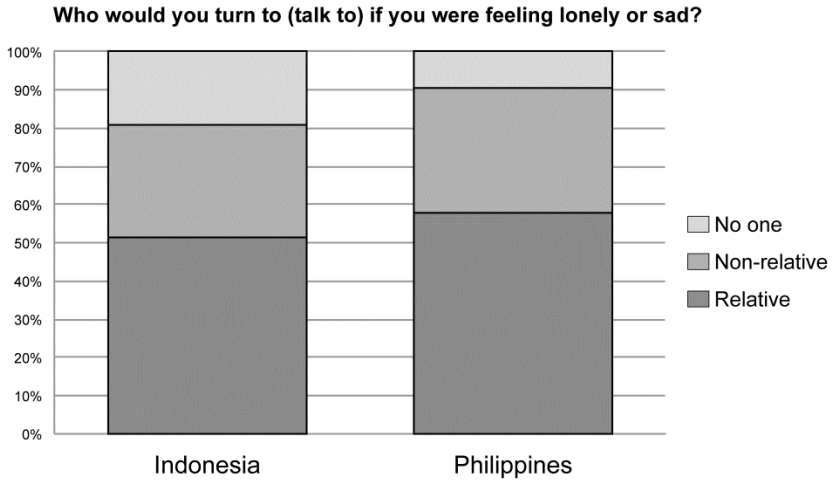

FIGURE 2: Sources of social support for children in Indonesia and the Philippines (n=1,009)

Why the Indonesian children were more likely than the Filipino children to refrain from seeking social support is an important question. As more children in the Indonesian sample had migrant mothers, it could be that the absence of mothers disrupts support networks to a greater extent than the absence of fathers. If mothers are typically the main source of emotional support for children, then their absence perhaps increases children's sense of isolation unless either they are able and willing to seek maternal support at a distance, or reconfigured family relationships provide 'surrogate' support.

Given the disruptions and reconfigurations of family roles attendant on the transnational migration of either parent, we might expect children living in transnational households to be generally less happy and less likely to seek social support than their counterparts living with both parents. When we investigated this expectation using the survey data, we found some confirmatory evidence but also differences between the two study countries. In each case our findings suggest that having a migrant parent may be detrimental to children's well-being when compared with that of their peers in non-migrant households, but only on one of the two well-being measures under

consideration. In relation to our measure of children's self-reported happiness, it was Indonesian children in transnational households who were significantly less likely than their peers to say they were happy or very happy ($\chi^2 = 14.90$, $p<0.001$). For Filipino children we found no difference between children living with both parents and those living in transnational households. The opposite was the case for our measure of social support. We found no difference between the children in Indonesia but found that Filipino children living in transnational households were *more* likely than children living with both parents to say that they would do nothing if they were feeling sad or lonely ($\chi^2 = 5.28$, $p<0.05$).

While these differences hold some interest since they are indicative of possible care deficits for children of migrant parents, they must be interpreted with caution. The crude comparison between children in non-migrant and transnational households does highlight differences between these groups but the differences between the two countries could be related to the composition of the samples. The Indonesia sample includes a higher proportion of children of migrant mothers compared with the sample for the Philippines. It could be that Indonesian children of migrant mothers are especially vulnerable to feelings of unhappiness and that Filipino children of migrant fathers are less likely to talk to anyone when they are feeling sad or lonely. Moreover, children's well-being may be related not only to which parent is absent but also to who is looking after them in the caring spaces of home. These two inter-related dimensions of difference for children in transnational families require further investigation to unpack the diversity of left-behind children's experiences.

THE CARING SPACES OF 'HOME'

Children in both Indonesian and Filipino sending communities generally encounter less disruption in care arrangements when their fathers migrate compared with the children of migrant mothers and those left behind by both parents. Nevertheless, the need to reallocate tasks previously undertaken by fathers means that non-migrant family members must take on the extra burden.

Mothers often assume both the disciplining of children and productive roles, such as agricultural tasks, previously undertaken by their husbands (Hugo, 2002). Children too are required to support their mother's 'double burden' by performing domestic chores such as sweeping, washing dishes and shopping. Thus continuity of maternal care does not imply an absence of change for these children. Indeed, the increased burden on their mothers could lead to a reduction in the quality of care they receive. Left-behind mothers may struggle to discipline their children or respond to their demands. Children may feel a lack of attention or become unwilling to burden their mothers further by sharing their own problems. Alternatively, Asis (1995; 2003) presents a more empowering possibility when she points out that children are also given space to grow independently upon the removal of restrictive parental control and may learn many important skills when they view their left-behind circumstances positively.

Fathers in Indonesia and the Philippines were the most important group of 'substitute' carers for primary school-aged children of mother migrants in the CHAMPSEA study. Other analysis (Graham and Jordan, 2011) indicates that this group of children in Indonesia did not suffer a care deficit in respect of their psychological well-being when compared with children in non-migrant households. Indeed, for the Philippines, children of migrant mothers left in the care of their fathers appear to be *less* likely to suffer serious conduct problems than children living with both parents. This finding is surprising given public perceptions of left-behind fathers in the Philippines but it also hides the diversity of practice when fathers are entrusted with 'mothering' roles. This emerges more clearly if we turn to the stories of the children interviewed a year after the main survey.[4]

Shirot was 12 years old at the time of the interview. His mother had been working in Saudi Arabia since he was 'still little' and he was being cared for by his father at home in Indonesia. His grandparents are dead and he lived with his father and his older sister, who has a disability. When asked about who takes care of his daily needs, it emerged that Shirot's sister played an active role in his care by preparing his school uniform, doing some of the laundry and contributing to the cooking.

[4] Pseudonyms are used for all children to ensure anonymity.

Shirot was old enough to wake himself up and bathe by himself, and he also took turns with his sister to do the laundry. He mentioned his father only in relation to preparing meals saying, "[My sister] and my father do the cooking", while Shirot himself contributed by buying the cooking ingredients. He was appreciative of his father in other ways, pointing out that his father made him happy because, "He always gives me sufficient pocket money. … Sometimes my friends do not get any pocket money." Shirot's father identified himself as his son's principal carer and indeed he assumed responsibility for his care when his wife left to work overseas. He had no regular help from extended family, although Shirot said that he asked his cousin who lives nearby if he needed help with his homework. Yet at least part of the daily burden of caregiving for Shirot was shouldered by his older sister.

Eunice, a 12 year old girl from the Philippines, was also being cared for by her father while her mother worked overseas. Yet her experiences differed from those of Shirot in terms of the extent of her father's involvement in her care. Talking of her Papa she recalled,

"He's the one who cooks breakfast for us, and when I'm sick he's the one who takes care of me. …He's the one who launders the clothes. …He's okay but its different if the mother is the one caring. …Because the mother is of course the light of the home. Because Papa is doing a woman's work. …He should be doing manly work right? Mama is the one doing the man's work."

Eunice, girl, 12 years old, the Philippines (father carer, mother in Canada)

Eunice recognised how attentive her father was towards her and her account did not mention anyone else involved in her care. Nevertheless, she was clear that she would have preferred her mother to take care of her, "Because … like I said, it's different when it's a woman". Eunice has an older sister but said that they were not close and that she was closest to her maternal grandmother. Her gendered understanding of caring norms possibly encouraged this relationship. However, when asked if she would tell her grandmother when she had a problem or was feeling sad she replied, "No. I'm embarrassed". Nor did she see her father as a source of support in such circumstances. While she was willing to seek help from her father with schoolwork, her response to feeling sad was not to tell anyone: "I don't go to anyone ... I just keep it a secret". Eunice's narrative indicates that, for some

children at least, the absence of their mother may create vulnerabilities related to seeking emotional support.

The CHAMPSEA study, along with previous research, reveals the diversity of negotiated care arrangements and experiences of care in 'home spaces' for children left behind by migrant parents. The influence of gender-normative discourses suggests that children living in transnational households will experience mother care, father care, and care from 'other mothers' differently and that this may affect their assessments of their own well-being. To explore this further, we turn to the survey and focus on the statistically significant differences found among Indonesian children on self-reported happiness (Figure 3), and among Filipino children on support when lonely or sad (Figure 4). By dividing the children living in transnational households into three groups according to caregiving arrangements (mother, father, and other carers) we examined whether there are differences in relative well-being among these groups compared to children in non-migrant households.

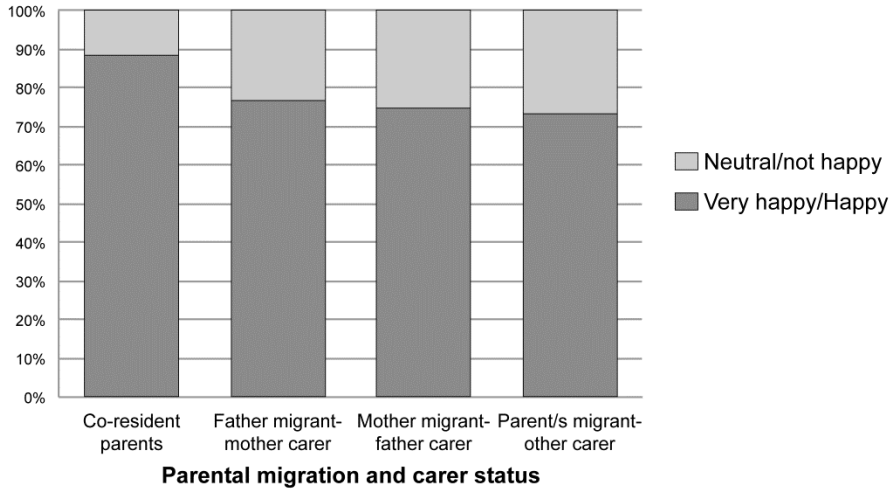

FIGURE 3: Self-reported happiness among Indonesian children by parental migration and carer status (n=510)

Figure 3 shows that the proportion of children who said that they were happy or very happy was more than 10 percent higher for those in non-migrant households compared to those living in all three types of transnational household. A chi square test established significant differences among the groups ($\chi^2 = 15.13$, $p<0.01$) and post-hoc examination of the adjusted residuals revealed that the

main source of variability is the more positive responses of Indonesian children in non-migrant households compared to other groups. There is comparatively little variation among the children with migrant parents, regardless of care arrangements. Although a lower proportion of children left-behind in the care of 'others' said they were happy or very happy compared to other groups, the difference is not statistically significant.

During the survey, open questions about what made children most happy and most unhappy were asked and the responses provide an indication of the children's understandings of 'happiness' and 'unhappiness'. The Indonesian children expressed a considerable variety of views about what made them most happy, including being loved by their parents, having the whole family together, playing football, having a birthday, learning the Indonesian language, and being able to attend school. These are not easy to summarise but if we distinguish between responses that referred to family and those that referred to friends or playing with friends (the two largest categories of response), then the importance of peer interaction for these children is evident. While 26 percent of the children mentioned being with family, 40 percent identified being with friends as what made them most happy. Interestingly, we found no systematic differences between the responses of children in non-migrant and transnational households, nor according to the children's ratings of their general happiness.

'Unhappiness' was constructed slightly differently by our sample of Indonesian children. Their responses to what made them most unhappy also varied considerably and included a parent being away, being bullied at school, not being given pocket money, getting sick, and falling off a bicycle. The largest category of responses relates to 'conflict', either with peers or with members of the child's family including their siblings (45%), 15 percent refer to (other) dimensions of family, such as being separated from a parent, and the remaining 40 percent are too diverse to summarise. However, we did find a significant difference between the responses of children in non-migrant and transnational households, with the latter more likely to mention family concerns (other than conflict) as the main cause of unhappiness ($\chi^2 = 40.78$, $p<0.001$). Further, those children who mentioned the

absence of a parent in response to what made them most unhappy were significantly less likely to report being happy or very happy in general ($\chi^2 = 8.21$, $p<0.05$). This is not surprising given the previously observed relationship between household migration status and children's perceptions of their general happiness but it does indicate that separation from a migrant parent is most likely a major reason for the less positive happiness ratings of left-behind children in Indonesia.

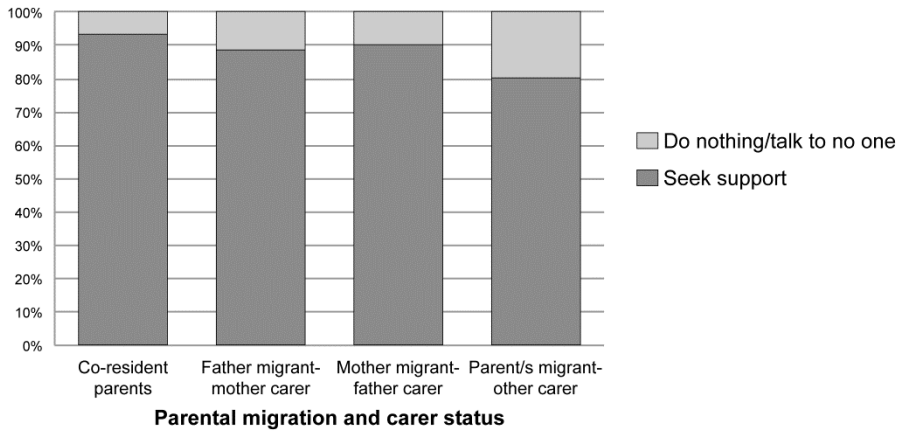

FIGURE 4: Social support among Filipino children by parental migration and carer status (n=499)

While around one in five Indonesian children gave less positive responses on self-reported happiness, only around one in ten Filipino children indicated that they would not seek social support if they were feeling sad or lonely. The group least likely to seek support was children in transnational households left in the care of 'others' (Figure 4), but small numbers in some cells invalidated a chi-square test. Nevertheless, the varied patterns of response among Filipino children in different kinds of household based on migration status and caregiving arrangements indicate that non-parental care may be more disadvantageous than leaving children in the care of their fathers. The group of children in the Philippines left in the care of 'others' is dominated by children of migrant mothers being cared for by grandmothers and, as we saw in Eunice's account, being close to a grandmother does not necessarily entail perceiving her as an appropriate source of support when experiencing negative feelings. In these circumstances maintaining connection across distance with a migrant mother is likely to be especially important. A common theme in the semi-structured interviews with children in

both the Philippines and Indonesia concerned their happiness when they were 'in touch' with a migrant parent.

BEING PARENTED FROM A DISTANCE: CONNECTIONS AND CONTACT

Maintaining connection and contact among the subject groups within the 'care triangle' may be crucial to the resilience of the transnational family. Previous studies have noted the ways in which modern telecommunications have transformed the possibilities for contact across distance (Svasek, 2008). Writing letters, which may take days or even weeks to reach their destination, has largely been replaced by texting or calling on mobile phones and by using e-mail or Skype on a computer, with the latter allowing visual as well as verbal updates in real time. The communications revolution has thus increased opportunities for active parenting from a distance and enabled migrant parents, especially mothers, to maintain a (distant) presence in their children's everyday lives. Yet these new ways of keeping 'in touch' have not simply made frequent contact possible but have also transformed the expectations of migrants and other family members left behind in relation to patterns of connection within the transnational family. Where a migrant parent fails to communicate regularly with their spouse and children, this may be interpreted as a lack of care or even abandonment. Moreover, prevailing gender norms suggest that expectations of contact from mothers may be higher than for fathers, as mothers must retain responsibility for nurturing the family despite their breadwinner role overseas. Patterns of communication between children and their migrant parents constitute a further dimension of diversity for children being parented from a distance.

Set against gendered expectations, the particular circumstances in which migrant mothers find themselves often circumscribe the opportunities for contact across distance. E-mail and Skype require specialist equipment that may be beyond the reach of migrants and their families back home. Internet cafés provide affordable access for some but pre-arranging contact times presents practical difficulties related to working hours and inhabiting different time zones. Perhaps the most important limitation on the opportunities for contact afforded to migrant women, however, concerns the

demands and proscriptions associated with their conditions of employment. For example, those employed as domestic workers often have to wait until they have time off to make contact with their families back home. This was evident in the accounts of some children of migrant mothers in the CHAMPSEA study who said that their mother calls them 'on her day off', 'every Sunday' or 'every vacation time'. When measured against the expectations of those left behind, such restrictions may contribute to mothers' feelings of guilt.

We know less about the contact patterns between migrant fathers and their left-behind children, and the evidence we have is mixed. To the extent that the transnational migration of fathers "fails to transcend, or trouble, the ideological gender bases upon which social identities are built" (Yeoh et al., 2005: 311), we might expect the practices of fathering from a distance to demonstrate concern for the disciplining of children. Parreñas (2008: 1068) concluded that, "[i]n sharp contrast to the care practices that embody transnational mothering, transnational fathering practices tend not to include acts of transnational communication with children", although she conceded that the sentiments of her middle-class respondents may not be universal. Those who rely on overseas earnings for their daily subsistence may have lower expectations in terms of contact between migrant parents and those left behind, suggesting that communication from migrant parents is not entirely gender scripted. In the context of poverty, regular contact could be seen as a relatively costly luxury to be foregone in favour of financing more basic family needs. Nevertheless, from the child's position in the 'care triangle' it is apparent that feelings of intimacy and attachment are likely to be disrupted when contact with a migrant parent is rare.

In contrast to Parreñas (2008), another study of 122 Overseas Foreign Worker (OFW) households in the Philippines (UNICEF, 2008) found that migrant fathers have *more frequent* contact with their left-behind children than do migrant mothers. The common means of communication was the mobile phone, followed by landline telephone, and the modal frequency of calls from an OFW father was once a week to daily, compared to once a week to more than once a week from OFW mothers. Our study provides additional evidence of more frequent contact from migrant fathers, and

confirms the importance of the mobile/cell phone in maintaining communication within the transnational family. For the great majority, mobile phone (either calling or texting) was by far the most common means, reported by 78 percent of left-behind children as the main means of communication with their father and 76 percent as the main means of communication with their mother. In comparison, the landline telephone was much less important and was the main means of communication used by just over 11 percent of left-behind children. One difference between the two study countries is notable; 7 percent of Filipino children said that e-mail was their main means of communication with a migrant parent, whereas none of the Indonesian children mentioned the computer. This reflects the differential availability of modern means of communication in the sampled communities. More worryingly, we found a minority of children who had no contact with their migrant parent, and this occurred more frequently for those with migrant mothers. Only 3 children (1% of the total sample) had no contact with their migrant father, but 18 children (nearly 7% of the total sample), 17 of them Indonesian, had no contact with their migrant mother.

Left-behind children generally describe greater feelings of abandonment when their mothers are not present compared to when their fathers are away. Such feelings have been found to decrease when mothers continue to show their care through frequent intimate communication and close supervision over their left-behind offspring.[5] Yet the emphasis in past scholarship on the practices of parenting from a distance does nothing to disturb representations of children as passive recipients. Shifting the focus towards children's perspectives is important precisely because it begins to draw out the various ways that children's agency is implicated in the practices of transnational family life. As Dreby's ethnographic work with Mexican transnationals highlights, children are not the powerless beings they are often depicted as in the literature but are rather empowered "in different

[5] In the case of Mexico, gender expectations in parenting affect the relationships between migrants and their children across distances even when migrant fathers and mothers communicate with their left-behind children in similar ways. Dreby (2006: 56) found that relationships between migrant Mexican mothers and their children left behind are dependent on the mothers' ability to "demonstrate emotional intimacy from a distance", while relationships between migrant fathers and their children are correlated with the fathers' capability in providing economically for the family when away. As successful economic migrants, fathers are able to maintain stable and regular relationships with their children in Mexico.

ways at different ages" (Dreby, 2007: 1050). The agency of young children in processes of connection and contact must be recognised but so must the limitations to its scope.

The unequal geometries of power noted by Parreñas (2005a) in relation to transnational communication by migrants can be extended to include children's capacity to initiate communication with a migrant parent, which is also contingent upon permission and opportunity. Children operate within a different sphere of influence and perspective than adults, within spaces that are typically predetermined by adults (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002). Adults often act as gatekeepers to young children's contact with their migrant mothers or fathers. Phone calls from migrant parents, for example, are frequently made to adults or older children first and then the phone is passed to the younger child. Some primary school-aged children interviewed in the Philippines and Indonesia already had a mobile phone of their own but many did not. Indeed one theme that emerged in their accounts was the aspiration to have their own phone in order to communicate directly with their migrant parent and their friends, but even those who had the means to maintain connection with a distant parent often had to wait to receive calls and could not initiate calls themselves.

Pani had just turned 11 years old when interviewed in Indonesia. He was living with his mother and two older brothers while his father worked in Malaysia. He recalled that his father had brought presents when he came home for a short visit the previous year, including a remote control car for himself and a mobile phone for one of his brothers. He explained that his migrant father contacts his family 'sometimes', adding,

"He calls my brother first. …[then] It [the phone] is given to my mother, then to Yoga [his other brother], then me ..".

Pani, boy, 11 years old, Indonesia (mother carer, father in Malaysia)

Pani estimated that his father usually called three times a month and revealed that it made him happy when his father called. His older brother, the one who was given the mobile phone by his father, appeared to have considerable control of contact within this transnational family as he was not only the one receiving the overseas calls but was also able to both call his father and send him short text

messages. Pani, on the other hand, said that he never called his father and was not yet able to write a text. Interestingly, from Pani's point of view, his own father conformed to traditional notions of fathers as breadwinners and disciplinarians. He described his parents, saying, "Sometimes my mother is so patient, my father is sometimes fierce .." It was apparent from Pani's account that he asked his father to buy him toys and his father warned him not to be naughty and sometimes admonished him for not wanting to go to read the Koran. Even so, the emotional 'gap' between father and child identified in Parreñas' (2008) work was not evident in Pani's case as it was clear that he missed his father greatly and wanted him to come home. Unlike other children interviewed in both study countries who generally identified some advantages to having a migrant parent, when asked whether he liked having a father working abroad, Pani replied "Of course not …". We can see that Pani's understanding of transnational family life was coloured by both his age and his past experiences. Neither of his parents had worked away from home until his father left for Malaysia in 2006 when he was 8 years old. Pani was used to having his father around during these early years and therefore missed his presence but he had not yet entered his teenage years when his relationship with his migrant father might be more likely to suffer strain from being parented from a distance.

Children in the Philippines appear to have greater access to modern communication technologies and therefore the opportunity to practice individual agency in different ways. Gladys, who was 11 years old at the time of interview, had been given a mobile phone by her seafarer father when he was home on a visit the previous year, although the family now had a computer and this had become the main means of communicating with her father. As she explained,

"Whenever Daddy wants to chat with us, he calls Mummy and tells her to turn on the computer so we can start chatting with each other ...once or twice a [week]. Previously, he communicated with us through the telephone. That was when we had no computer yet … but we don't use text messaging much. … When I'm in 'I'm mobile' mode (Yahoo Messenger), Daddy sends me a message telling me to study well".

Gladys, girl, 11 years old, the Philippines (mother carer, father seafarer)

More generally, the children's accounts reveal considerable differences in their access to modern modes of communication, with those who had their own mobile phone able to text an absent parent

when they wished while others had to go (or be taken) to a relative's house or internet café to make contact. Nevertheless, the majority of these children, and their families, shared the experience of having to wait for the migrant parent to call them. A few mentioned the strategy of making a missed call first to let the migrant parent know that they were ready to receive a call, suggesting that cost may be an additional factor regulating the frequency of contact.

Several children said that there were times when they were unable to text because they had no credit on their phone. Set against raised expectations associated with the possibilities of modern technology, we might anticipate that the limitations imposed by a lack of financial resources, control by co-present adults and the restrictions placed on migrant parents by their employment conditions would be particularly disappointing for the children. Further, none of the children had yet gone to secondary school and parents may have considered some not old enough, or not responsible enough, to handle a mobile phone or computer.

Ratri, an 11 year old Indonesian girl being looked after by her maternal grandmother while both her parents were working abroad, did have a mobile phone and explained that she was sometimes able to call or text one or other of her parents. She talked more frequently to her mother than to her father and revealed that her mother called her regularly once a week. When asked how often her father called her, she replied, "I don't know … it is uncertain …". Ratri's experience of being parented from a distance suggests that it was her mother who put in the hard emotional work of maintaining connection and contact. It was her mother who usually supplied her with credit for her phone, and it was also her mother who provided guidance. In her account of their weekly conversations, Ratri said, "She says that I have to study diligently, then … Don't play cell phone all the time." Ratri had been using some of her monthly credit 'allocation' to call her friends. Her family was relatively wealthy due to her parents' earning overseas and could afford to provide her with a mobile phone. Nevertheless, her mother was concerned that she used the phone responsibly.

For some other children contact was not only limited, but also brought up painful emotions. Carl's mother had left the Philippines when he was 7 years old to work as a nursing aide in a hospital

in Saudi Arabia. At the time of interview three years later, she had not yet been home for a visit. Carl still missed his mother and sometimes asked her when she is coming home. Like many of his peer group in the CHAMPSEA study, Carl could not contact his migrant parent directly and when his mother contacted the family 'back home' she called his father's mobile phone. Carl recalled,

"[Mummy contacts us] through the cellphone…Sometimes she texts, sometimes she calls. Just once and a while. …I feel sad [when she calls]. … I want her to go home. …I tell her to be careful."
Carl, boy, 10 years old, the Philippines (father carer, mother in Saudi Arabia)

At least in Carl's view, he did not have as much contact with his mother as he would have liked. Three years is a long time for any child not to see their mother, especially when, as in the case of Carl, the mother has fulfilled the role of full-time homemaker prior to migrating overseas for paid employment.

Parental contact and children's subjective well-being

Children's response to (infrequent) contact with a migrant parent may be happiness, disappointment, resignation or sadness, but what impact does this have on their well-being? And is infrequent contact with an absent mother more detrimental to a child's well-being than infrequent contact with a migrant father? We turn again to the survey data to investigate patterns of contact within both transnational spaces and home spaces and their relationships to subjective well-being among Indonesian children (Figure 5) and social support among Filipino children (Figure 6). In our analysis we examined four groups of children: (1) those living with both parents and who thus had 'in person' contact with their mother and father; (2) those living in transnational households who had 'in person' contact with their co-resident parent; (3) those living in transnational households who had at least weekly contact with their migrant parent; and (4) those living in transnational households who had less than weekly contact with their migrant parent. If infrequent contact with a migrant mother or father is detrimental to a child's sense of well-being, then children in the last group are likely to be the most vulnerable.

Figure 5a shows the proportion of Indonesian children who said they were happy or very happy across the four groups defined by the nature and frequency of contact with their mother. A chi-square test established that there were significant differences between the groups ($\chi^2 = 17.01$, $p<0.01$). Children in non-migrant households had the same happiness advantage already observed. However, among children living in transnational households, the group most likely to give a negative assessment of their own well-being comprised children who had less than weekly contact with their migrant mother. This suggests that the efforts of migrant mothers to maintain connection and contact from a distance do make a difference to child well-being. While children in non-migrant households were significantly more likely to report being happy or very happy, it is children who had infrequent contact with migrant mothers who suffered the most. Interestingly, the parallel analysis in relation to contact with fathers (Figure 5b) also demonstrates significant differences between the groups ($\chi^2 = 17.04$, $p<0.01$), but in this case the most disadvantaged group (as identified by the adjusted residuals) was those children living with a co-resident father in a transnational household. Even though Figure 5b focuses on contact with fathers, the pattern of responses provides further support for the negative impact of maternal absence as it was children who had in person contact with their father and lived in transnational households (i.e., mother migrant households) who had significantly decreased subjective well-being. The negative relationship between the self-reported happiness of children and infrequent contact with migrant fathers is just outside the bounds of statistical significance, suggesting that maintaining closer ties between migrant fathers and children is a factor that warrants further study.

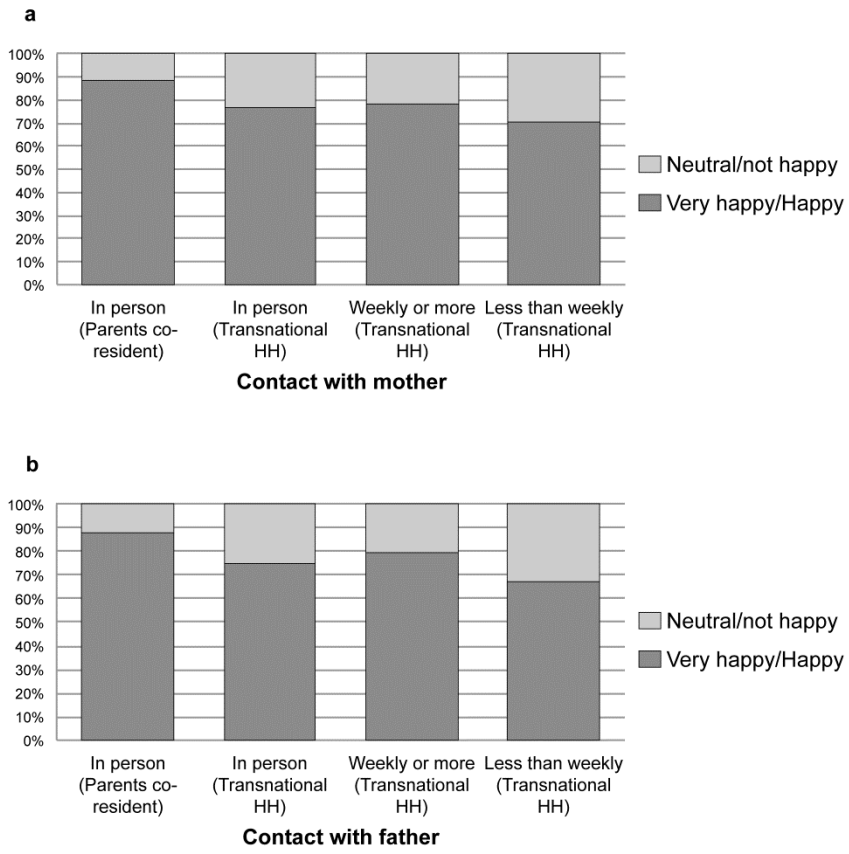

FIGURE 5: Self-reported happiness among Indonesian children by (a) contact with mother and (b) contact with father (n=510)

The reasons for differences in frequency of contact between children and their migrant parent/s are not always easy to identify. As we have seen, one explanation is a lack of access to communication mediums by migrant parents. There is a particular concern that women in some destinations and low status occupations may themselves lack agency to initiate contact with their left-behind family members if employers restrict access to phones or even take their passports and mobile phones away upon arrival (Bales, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 2008). This issue deserves further attention not only for the basic denial of human rights, but also for the possible impact on child well-being. It is not yet clear, for example, whether it is the frequency of contact itself that influences child well-being, or whether infrequent contact is part of a wider set of distressing circumstances that is manifested in the responses of left-behind children when asked about their own happiness.

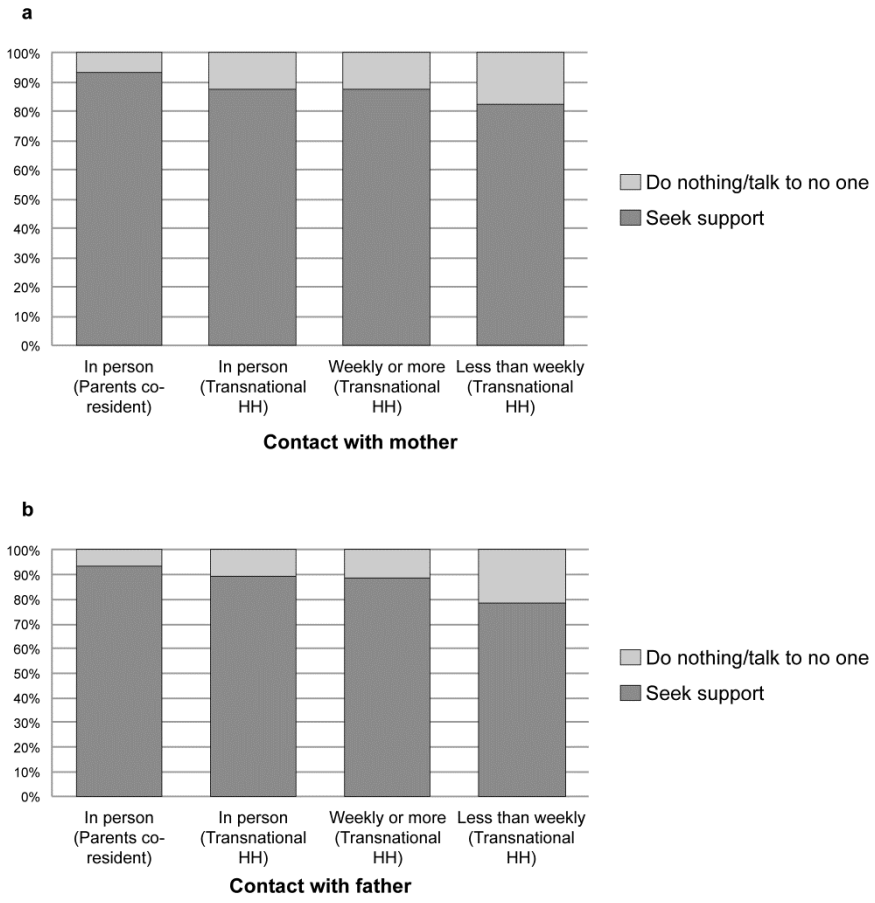

FIGURE 6: Social support among Filipino children by (a) contact with mother and (b) contact with father (n=499)

In the Philippines, the differences between children living with both parents in non-migrant households and those living in transnational households were most evident in children's responses when questioned about who they would turn to if they felt lonely or sad. Figure 6a shows the proportion of children who said they would seek support across the four groups defined by contact with their mother. Although a smaller proportion of children who had infrequent (less than weekly) contact with their migrant mother were inclined to seek social support compared to children in non-migrant households (83.3% and 93.5% respectively), the differences between the groups are not statistically significant. In contrast, the equivalent analysis of contact with fathers (Figure 6b) not only showed significant differences between groups ($\chi^2 = 9.35$, $p<0.05$) but also revealed that the most disadvantaged group was those children in less than weekly contact with their fathers. This finding suggests that frequent contact with migrant fathers is also important to children's sense of

well-being. Further research is needed to explain this relationship but our analysis does suggest that migrant fathers can, and the majority do, contribute to the resilience of the Filipino transnational family by staying in frequent contact with children 'back home'.

The examination of the relationship between contact with migrant parents and child well-being further illuminates how family relationships are operating across transnational spaces. What emerges in particular is the deficit in child well-being from the child's perspective when the circuits of communication with migrant mothers *and* migrant fathers are not maintained.

CONCLUSION

We have investigated two dimensions of the 'care triangle' from the perspective of primary school-aged children in Indonesia and the Philippines. Placing the children within the web of relations that constitute the (transnational) family nexus, we explored both the caring spaces of 'home' and how children experienced *being parented* from a distance. The survey data from the CHAMPSEA study revealed systematic differences in the subjective well-being of children associated with the gender of the migrant parent and caregiving arrangements. In Indonesia, children living in transnational households, (especially those with a migrant mother left in the care of their father) were more likely to experience a happiness deficit than those living in non-migrant households. In the Philippines, differences in seeking social support suggested that children with a migrant parent(s) left in the care of 'others' were the most vulnerable. Moreover, children in less frequent contact with migrant parents were generally disadvantaged in relation to their subjective well-being. It would, of course, have been possible to extend this analysis further by fitting multivariate models to the data but our purpose here was to reveal the complexity of associations and the scope of difference. We therefore drew on the children's accounts of their everyday lives to gain insight into both the diversity of experience which underlies the statistical associations and the agency of children themselves.

While we have been able to interrogate some aspects of the web of intimate relationships that constitute the transnational family and the implications for the children's understandings of their own

well-being, this study has certain limitations which should be noted. It provides only a partial exploration of diversity within the care triangle. We have examined differences between groups of children defined by parental migration and who provides their care. However, other contextual factors could be expected to influence their experiences, including cultural differences among the sampled communities as well as the country of destination and the occupation of migrant parents. Future research will address the associations between these factors and patterns of contact between migrant mothers/fathers and children left behind; we are especially interested in whether the opportunities for labour migrants in particular places and/or jobs to contact family members 'back home' are restricted by their circumstances. Moreover, in this study our focus has been on children's perceptions and agency. Other perspectives deserve attention, including those of co-present carer/s and migrant parent/s.

Using our current findings as a base, there are many other avenues for further research that will help open up the inner workings of the 'family' in Southeast Asia to critical scrutiny. A key extension of this work could focus on a gendered analysis of children's agency in the context of parental migration; undoubtedly, a study of the agency of left-behind children as shaped by the moral economy of gender within the framework of transnational families would make a valuable contribution to the conceptualisation of children's agency.

As we have noted, the burgeoning body of literature on the place of children in the context of migration has focused on making more visible children's agency in constructing their own experiences as "actors and competent arbiters of change even in situations of exploitation" (Aitken et al. 2007: 4). This is a move we applaud, and to which we aim to contribute by building a counterpoint to the earlier vein of work which tends to ignore children-in-migration completely, pathologizes them as passive victims of trafficking, or frames them as " baggage that weighs down adult migrants" (Orellana et al., 2001: 588). At the same time, our work on the CHAMPSEA project indicates that children's social agency and the degrees of freedom they experience as actors are highly variable and shaped by a microcosmos of multiple intersecting factors, including the intricate

relationalities of the ‘care triangle’ that we have focused on in this paper. We contend that it is thus equally important to acknowledge that many left-behind children negotiate life conditions which they are not fully (and sometimes only minimally) able to affect, and that a desire to understand children’s agency needs also to engage with understanding the complex conditions which influence children’s lives and set limits to their choices. This approach to understanding children’s agency is exemplified in at least two ways in the paper.

First, while it is clear that the children in the CHAMPSEA study were able to articulate quite clear views about their experiences of the care relationships they sustain in both home and transnational spaces, it is also evident that their perspectives are largely shaped by the prevailing gender scripts for mothers (‘lights of the home’ or ‘nurturers’) and fathers (‘pillars’ or ‘breadwinners’). This in turn is likely to account for the stronger sense of abandonment that some left-behind children in the study experienced when their mothers left to work abroad compared to those whose fathers went away. While there were some indications that children are able to adapt their everyday lives quite quickly to father-carers in the absence of their mothers, the evidence also points more substantially to the fact that socialised gender expectations continue to prevail at the emotional and psychological levels. In short, gender expectations of parenting roles among left-behind children in our study tend to lag behind pragmatically driven shifts in the nature of mothering and fathering practices at the southernmost end of the care chain. We should add that while family practices have had to change, and the children in our study were cognizant of the impact of these changes in their everyday lives, there was also a strong sense that the ‘family’ by and large continues to be held together in ideational terms, even as it becomes more malleable to reflect alternative care arrangements.

Second, the paper underscores the importance of sustaining communication among members of the ‘care triangle’ (left-behind child – migrant parent – co-present carer) over time and distance as a means to compensate for care deficits that left-behind children experience. A deeper understanding of how transnational communication is practised requires attention to the interplay of social agency

and structural constraints not only in the context of the left-behind child but also in terms of the circumstances surrounding the migrant parent's position. As the paper shows, transnational connection and contact are acts of agency, but also at the same time circumscribed by the ability of both migrant parents and children to exercise agency. In sum, 'being family' across distance, from the perspectives of migrant parents, co-present caregivers and left-behind children, is sustained through acts of communication that have to be actively negotiated under conditions not always of their own making.

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