

Should You Accept a Friends Request From Your Mother? And Other Filipino Dilemmas

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Abstract: This paper uses the concept of 'cutting the network' derived from the work of Marilyn Strathern to examine the relationship between two kinds of social network, that of kinship and the system of friends constructed on social networking sites. Specifically the material comes from a study of Filipina domestic workers and nurses in the UK and their relationship to their left behind children in the Philippines. A bilateral system of kinship can lead to a proliferation of relatives, while the use of the Friendster social networking site can lead to a proliferation of friends. It is when these two systems clash following the request by one's mother to become a friend that the constraints and problems posed by both systems comes into view. Cases show that it is possible to use social networking sites to help mothers become close friends for their absent children, but more commonly the increasing presence of actual mothers through new media disrupts the relationships that children had developed for themselves to a idealised projection of motherhood.

Keywords: *social networks, motherhood, Filipinos, social networking sites, kinship, migrants*

Introduction

The idea that making visible relationships is far more than merely a representation of those relationships has become widely accepted in

anthropology largely through the writings of Marilyn Strathern. In her work a person is constituted by a network of relationships, which are not just made manifest, but come to exist through becoming apparent. So in The

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Gender of The Gift the birth of a child had significance in particular because it objectified the relationships that are made evident with and through the existence of that child (Strathern, 1986; Gell, 1999). Evidently having a child is what makes people related as parents.

Scroll on a few years and it looks as though Strathern was not merely a theorist but a rather prescient prophet. Since today when so many of us regularly use social networking sites, it seems almost like common sense to see an individual on our computer screen as constituted by their network of relationships and thereby to regard social networks as the medium of objectification that makes these not only visible, but also constitutive. A student increasingly discovers who they are by going on line and checking to see in what regard they are held by how many people, and how they have engaged with them and with each other. Social networks also seem to generate their own compulsion to visibility. Just as people don't feel they are actually on holiday unless they see photographs of themselves enjoying that holiday, so today some people don't seem to feel they have had an experience of an event unless they have broadcast it through Facebook or Twitter.

It is almost as though we had all read Strathern and wanted to transform our lives to be in greater accordance with her understanding of the nature of social networks. Even with mild exposure to social network sites it becomes apparent that these are more than simply a means to make prior relationships visible. They have their own capacity to create unprecedented forms of networking. Your Facebook site may include those who had been

your friends, though your medium of interaction with these friends is thereby changed. But in addition your Facebook sites may list several hundred other friends¹. The use of this word for this online network implies an analogy with offline friendship, but it is better to see them as the product of the propensities of the social networking sites themselves. Subtly the semantics of the word friend is altered (for semantic continuities more generally see Jones and Scheffelin, 2009). Competition over the quantities of friends made visible to others works in a largely unprecedented fashion. We are swiftly reaching the point where perhaps the majority of the world's population face the 'Melanesian' question of how making visible also constitutes one's social networks.

The concern of this paper is not, however, with the issue of visibility per se, nor to suggest that relationships here now rate in just the same fashion as those of Melanesia. Rather this paper addresses a problem of networking that becomes evident as a result of this visibility. Strathern (1996) has been as much concerned with the issue of cutting networks, as with that of creating networks. Again we start with kinship. Systems of bilateral kinship, where you count ascendants and descendants on both sides as your relatives, appear to be theoretically endless. The number of people who can claim to be ones relative proliferates quickly. But in practice people find modes of restriction and selection, to limit their kinship networks, often by reference to other cross cutting systems of relationships. The title of this paper makes clear that things can also work the other way around. We may today

also be part of a Social Network site that seems to endlessly proliferate friends, and give the promise of entirely open communication. It is when we are suddenly confronted with another social network, that of kinship, exemplified by the fantasy and fear over one's own mother wanting to become a friend, that we see how one network potentially cuts another and either shows its limits, or creates actual constraints on that ideal of pure communication. This applies not just to Facebook, which began as a peer based student network. Would someone's mother be any more welcome if the child had entered into MySpace primarily with the idea of getting connected with the latest Indie bands?

This problem of kinship cutting social networks is also evident if we turn to issues of methodology. Research on the internet (e.g. Hine, 2000) has always faced the question of whether we should treat the online world as an autonomous site of investigation, or contextualise such studies in the ethnography of offline worlds. At one extreme Boellstorff has recently published a spirited defence of research restricted entirely to the online lives of people using Second Life, which he regards as rich enough to constitute its own ethnographic context (2008: 60-65). By contrast Miller and Slater (2000: 4-7), argued that on-line social communities often reflected very specific issues and social contexts offline, which are themselves never apparent online, but which can account for much of what is apparent online. Even a consideration of the most immediate offline context, the bedrooms within which adolescents use their computers, can contribute

markedly to our appreciation of their online activity (Horst, 2009).

To be fair, Boellstorff's book is surely successful in its own terms, and in practice all ethnography creates the limits of its own sense of context (Dilley, 1999; Strathern, 2006). Our point is certainly not that we regard online activity as somehow virtual as opposed to more real or authentic life offline. Clearly many people who are sceptical of online studies seem to regard these as somehow lacking in authenticity or less real than activity online. Our position is quite the opposite. We regard online worlds as now part and parcel of everyday modern life to which they are increasingly integral. But once we consider the issue of a mother asking to be accepted as a friend on a social network site, the argument becomes redundant. Whether we like it or not, in this instance the offline world has itself erupted upon the online world. Similarly Miller recalls an occasion when a friend in London, an avid second-lifer, who was engaged in a torrid relationship online, asked him to be present when he first met the woman behind her second life avatar in the offline world. At this point it is hard to see any virtue in the restriction to online encounters.

Others have been concerned with a much broader issue of offline context. The general review by boyd and Ellison (2007) of research on how people use social networking was critiqued by Beer (2008) who argued that the sites production needed to be contextualised within more general knowing capitalism (for which see Thrift, 2005). And its usage needed to be contextualised in wider studies of

friendship (such as Pahl, 2000). boyd (2010) has in fact recently conducted this larger research on friendship on and off line.

When Miller and Slater (2000) wrote an initial monograph on the use of the Internet, there was a general presumption was that the internet was intrinsically a universalising technology. Fundamentally anti-culture - where the word culture implicates difference by virtue of background – as well as a negation of conventional forms of space. The study was situated in Trinidad precisely to confront those assumptions. Today, by contrast this same review of social networking studies (e.g. boyd and Ellison, 2007) indicates that many are based on specific regional populations. Indeed often social networking sites such as Orkut or Friendster are developed with one market in mind such as US, but instead become dominant in unenvisioned regions such as Brazil or the South-East Asia.

This paper started from this regional rather than universal aspect of social networking sites. It derives from a study of the impact of new media on the relationships between Filipina migrant mothers and their left-behind children. We reasoned that to understand how new media effect relationships we might best focus on relationships that are entirely constituted by those media. We have worked mainly with Filipinos who typically left the Philippines from five to twenty-five years ago leaving behind very young children who they could then rarely visit. We wanted to know how parenting, which once depended upon painfully slow communication through letters and mailed cassette tapes had

changed with access to diverse, instant and cheap new media, such as Yahoo Messenger, webcam, texting and social networking. Our concern was not just with understanding the media, but equally with the welfare of populations of migrants increasingly divided from the people they love. We would argue that migration studies that have tended to concentrate on issues such as international labour flows, should also focus on something that is paramount in the minds of the migrants themselves, how to maintain their core relationships.

With these questions in mind we have been working since 2007 with Filipinos, mainly in London but with some in Cambridge, mainly with domestic workers but with some nurses, and mainly with women but with some men. Then in the winter of 2008/09 we went to the Philippines to meet with the children of these same mothers, researching with twenty such paired or multiple mother-child relationships. We also worked with other children whose mothers were abroad. The research includes interviews with a 103 Filipinos.

There is a considerable anthropological literature on Filipino migrants (e.g. Constable, 1995, 1997; McKay, 2005; Parrenas, 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Pingol, 2001) including their use of new media. There has been a particular focus upon texting (Perterra, 2002, 2005), for which the Philippines is known as the most prolific texting country in the world. Behind this is the sheer scale of migration from the Philippines, both the better known export of domestic labour, carework and nursing for women, and the less well known migration of men to work

as seafarers and for construction in the Middle East (e.g. Lamvik, 2002). Even by modest official estimates we are dealing with a migration of at least 8 million people which constitutes ten per cent of the Philippine population (Asis, 2008).

Friendster, Facebook and Multiply: social networks in the Philippines

The most common social networking sites we encountered in the Philippines were Friendster, Facebook and Multiply. Friendster, which is almost ubiquitous, was originally launched (2002) as an on-line dating site in the US and had five million users by 2004 (boyd, 2004). Today it claims 100 million registered users, and 30 million monthly users. Mainly in South East Asia, with less than 6% in the US (Moses, 2009). Facebook, founded in 2004 is currently the world's most popular social networking site. In April 2009 it had over 200 million monthly users, half of them daily users (Facebook, 2009). Started in Harvard as a peer network for students, it opened out to others in 2006 and currently two-thirds of users are out of college and 70% outside the US (Facebook, 2009). Multiply, founded in December 2003, currently has 13 million members. Unlike Facebook and Friendster the emphasis is on sharing photographs and videos, and is orientated to families and others who want to stay in touch. It claims postings of more than three million photographs, twenty thousand videos and fifty-five thousand blog entries every day (Multiply, 2009).

Extrapolating from an ethnographic study of communications by a PhD

student, Lidia Pola, in a town to the South of Manila in 2008 most young people in the Philippines have Friendster accounts. Amongst 13 year olds being without a Friendster account had already become as unthinkable as being without a mobile phone. Pola's data suggests an average of 15 relatives and 90 non relatives in their Friendster friendship circles (compare Horst and Miller, 2006: 89-97). The second most popular use of such sites was in posting photographs on Multiply. The issue of privacy that arises from usage by young people elsewhere (e.g. boyd, 2006, Livingstone, 2008) does not yet seem a major concern here.

Filipinos commonly narrate a story which claims that the dominance of Friendster in Philippines is mere happenstance, spread through a group of California based Filipino students, which then gave it 'first mover advantage' in the Philippines itself. But, as has been argued with respect to other media, (Miller, 1992; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992), there may be other ways anthropologists can account for the regional appropriation of a particular technology. Factors that may have favoured Friendster in the Philippines include the prominence given on the home page to wider networks of friendship that people have in common and the use of reciprocal testimonials as opposed to mere messages and postings. Our participants suggested an affinity with Filipino concepts of utang (debt) and reciprocity. These exchanges of testimonials have entirely separated from their roots in the original establishment of Friendster as an on-line dating site.

This argument for local suitability is echoed by the current CEO of Friendster, which remains a private company. '[Friendster] has more personalisation of your profile page than say a Facebook', Kimber said on an interview for the Sydney Morning Herald.

Facebook is quite utilitarian whereas Friendster is more focused on community and also family - there's a lot of Friendster users that have extended family and family's a very core concept in Asia and very much epitomises the social structure of how Asians connect and relate to each other. A lot of these Asian countries do not have social security or the dole so families support each other and Friendster is a key way that families in Asia contact each other. (Moses, 2009).

Older age groups are more likely to favour Facebook, a reflection of the fact that the site's fastest growing demographic is 35 years and older (Facebook, 2009). In the Philippines usage also reflects a growing social divide at least analogous to class elsewhere (compare Hargittai, 2007). Usage of Facebook seems to correlate with greater educational and financial capital. Equally, older children who saw themselves as more sophisticated might adopt Facebook to separate themselves from these younger children. Notwithstanding their connections with relatives earning money abroad, many of our own participants originated in lower income and rural backgrounds, so it was Friendster that dominated, apart from those we knew through the university where Facebook was the norm.

Common to social networking elsewhere we find in the Philippines young people competing over the size of friends lists. Florencia has a 1000 friends, which given that there is a maximum of 500 for each Friendster account implies two completely full accounts. Andres closed his account when he reached 997 friends, while Ernesto has a mere 600. These are typical of late teens and early 20's. Of course this pursuit of friends in quantity says nothing about the size of people's active networks (Marlow, 2009). Eduarda who has been using Friendster since 2004 on a daily basis, has 380 friends, many of whom are ex college and school. About 30% of all her friends are from her local island. Of which only her three best friends have access to her private photo albums. She has written testimonials for about 24 people. Eduarda cannot spend much time on Friendster during the working week but spends at least 3 hours on the site during her days off work. A local issue is whether to use English or Tagalog, the dominant dialect of the Philippines as a whole and especially the area around Manila where we carried out fieldwork. Many use Taglish which blends Tagalog and English.

Social network sites are rarely seen as primarily important in transnational relationships. In most of our cases they are simply one more possibility within a proliferation of new channels of communication. They remain secondary to Yahoo Chat or texting, for example. They thereby form part of a wider communicative or media ecology (Ito et al, 2009; Slater and Tacchi, 2004). Marites checks her Facebook every day to keep up with news, and

employs Friendster to connect with ex school friends, but doesn't view either as particularly important. With Gregorio, who feels that something like 80% of his school friends have ended up abroad, Friendster becomes rather more important. Less to communicate with them; more to monitor what is happening to them as they make their way in the wider world, leaving him behind.

Friendster is also used within separated families. It is the main way Florencia keeps in touch with her brother noting when he has added photos or changed his account. Typically with social networking sites, she has thereby come to know some of his friends in Britain, but not learnt anything about the UK itself. It is only a medium for information-seeking in respect to direct instrumental concerns such as looking for a job. Posting photographs on Mulitply is also used to share news within a transnational family or keep track of respective activities. It presents a rather distorted view of life abroad, dominated by photos of holidays or key events such as graduations rather than everyday life.

This use of social networking may extend to an absent parent. Vicente posts pictures of his children for his mother who posts photos of her holidays for him. Estrella persuaded her mother to use Friendster for much the same reason. This proved important when the daughter of her brother-in-law died two days after the birth: 'I put all the pictures on the Friendster so that Mama can view what happened to the child.' There is nothing intrinsic to social networking that makes the technology itself more appropriate for younger people, any more than

say driving a car. But the particular history of its adoption leads people to see Friendster as only now starting to be colonised by older unsophisticated relatives, making it important for those deemed too young or too old for Facebook. Evelyn aged 55 is starting to use Friendster regularly in London. Even if she doesn't have the confidence to upload her own photographs she can frequently look at the photos and updates of her hundred friends. Already a godson in the Philippines found her and now communicates with her in London. Olivia at nearly 60 has started using the site for the sole purpose of communicating with her children.

Mother-child relationships and social networking

To understand the dilemma posed by our title requires us to go beyond these descriptive details and start to unpick the underlying categories we have employed. What actually do we mean when we talk about a relationship or indeed a mother? The emphasis in recent anthropological writings following Carsten (2004) had been on the flexibility and negotiability of kinship, where people can become identified with a kinship category largely through their behaviour and the experience of those involved. A father may be the person who acts consistently as a father rather than a biological progenitor. This was important as a critique of earlier assumptions, but Miller has argued recently (2008) we should be careful in generalising these conclusions beyond Carsten's fieldsite in Malaysia.

For example, in Miller's (2001) previous work on shopping in London, he presents a theory of kinship based on a dialectic between a relatively fixed normative category and the actual person who inhabits that category. Being a parent or sibling or husband, comprises a series of strong given expectations and idealisations. Most acts of shopping are best explained as attempts to decrease the distance between these relatively fixed expectations and the actual person who inhabits that kinship category. The problem arises when we accentuate the flexibility over the fixity. For example Miller (2007) suggests that Finch and Mason (2000) in their study of inheritance in the UK try to emphasise this flexibility in families. But their data suggests that for major assets, such as the house, inheritance is equally divided according to the category of kin irrespective of the behaviour of the person who occupies that category. Only certain genres, such as jewellery, express the affective dimension of kin relations. So when we speak about a mother in the Philippines we need to look for both the normativity pertaining to the category of mother and the behaviour of actual mothers. The third point to this triangle, emphasised in material culture studies as well as by Strathern, is the medium for their relationship. In this case, the impact of the social networking sites themselves.

Popular journalism may present social networking sites as places for the expression of individuality, something echoed by US teenagers who may spend much of their day on them (see Horst 2009). But from a research perspective they may impress more by their conformity. Wallis Motta (formerly a

PhD student of Miller) studied the use of social networking sites amongst IT entrepreneurs in the Cambridge region. She found them to be quite oppressive forms of visibility, in which those who fail to conform to quite tight restrictions as to appropriate online appearance are punished thereby. With more professional sites such as LinkedIn there is not just pressure to conform, but also considerable pressure to take part. There is also the common Facebook anecdote of desperately emailing a friend to remove a compromising photograph that was the unintended consequence of a great night out. So the normativity of the social networking site is as important as the normativity of being mother and child and the normativity of their relationship.

Cecilia is aged 23 and was born in Manila. Her parents raised pigs, but the business folded and her mother felt she had to leave to pay their debts, going to the US as a caregiver although entirely without training for this job. Typical for our fieldwork was an underlying issue of estrangement between wife and husband. Her father was already seeing other women and taking drugs. After ten years in the US her mother has only returned once to the Philippines the year before we met Cecilia. The time of absence between 14 to 22, is pretty much exactly that period of adolescence when our general expectations around contemporary parenting suggest that a parent will need to shift from a more hierarchical figure of discipline and boundedness to a more equal friend like relationship. In this case Cecilia felt that she had grown much closer to her mother after she left, and that

their separation combined with easy communication had provided just the right degree of autonomy to facilitate this change in their relationship.

This equalising process was greatly facilitated by the fact that the child was dealing with her parents divorce. In Miller's recent fieldwork in South London (Miller, 2008) children often refer to 'parenting their parents' because such episodes often bring out the most immature aspects of both parent's behaviour. If that hadn't been enough to contend with, the same daughter had then taken on the task of rallying her other relatives in the US to support her mother who became stricken with cancer and had to go through chemotherapy. She is also consulting with both of her parents on how to support her younger sibling, who has had a much more negative reaction to their parents' departure. Finally, and most recently, she finds herself talking to her father's new partner in California about their recently born baby, and having to overcome the initial awkwardness of that relationship in order to empathise both with this young mother and her father's devotedness to his new infant.

Under all these circumstance it is also not surprising to report that her use of internet communication is intense. She and her parents may be online through webcam when eating meals, comparing the food they are eating (different meals in different time zones). Her brother plays guitar to serenade his mother, and on another she places the microphone just so that she can complain about his snoring. She and her mother frequently go shopping together, based on simultaneous visiting of websites, after which her

mother pays for a garment and has it delivered to her daughter. Both her mother and her father are on social networking sites such as Facebook and Multiply. And her parents have a habit of viewing pretty much everything she posts. Not only that, but also going further and viewing the postings of her friends, which as her friends point out, seems to them a little weird. 'My friends would say, 'Hey your mom viewed me.' I would say ' Ooh sorry!' My mom is a cyber freak'. She does, however, use privacy controls to prevent her parents seeing the kind of party pictures almost any daughter wouldn't want her mother to see, or for example, evidence that she went to see a boyfriend that her mother particularly disapproves of. The problem is more her use of a Multiply account as a kind of visual diary including photographs or more or less everything she does.

She explicitly recognises the advantage of this media based distant communication as allowing her to achieve, with relative ease, an autonomy which most teenagers have to fight for. She also see that her use of social network sites has allowed her to shift from a more traditional parent to daughter relationship that sits awkwardly on Facebook, into a category that seems almost pure Facebook, that is best friend. Something that has been accomplished so successfully that it rather freaks out her own friends, who are being incorporated thereby. It will also be no surprise that we found this 23 year old to be a remarkably composed and mature individual who we could only describe as rather awe inspiring. Her example demonstrates that it is entirely possible for a mother to be successful

incorporated into a social network. This is not to say that networking is inherently equalising. It can be intensely hierarchal (Ito et al., 2009), but in this case it is the particular cultural genre of Facebook as a peer to peer medium that creates this possibility of parent as friend. It does so not just by allowing the actual mother to come closer to the normative category of friend, but because the scale and importance of social network sites is starting to have an impact upon the normative categories themselves.

At the other extreme was a young woman who had not heard from her father since she was a small child. When she started using Friendster she thought of typing her father's and half brother's names to see 'what comes up'.

And there's a profile under that name, and I click on it and it looks exactly like my dad. So this is my [half] brother. I messaged him, then 'I am his daughter. I don't know if you know me. I'm not looking for anything, I just want to know how he is.' He answers, and then he goes, 'Fuck you, my dad doesn't have other kids.' So this guy, who's 27 years old, doesn't know that I exist. He didn't know! So I say, 'Hey, it's not my fault that he's my dad. I'm not looking for anything.' Yes. He's based in the States. He was 27 at that time and he never knew that I existed. Although I knew that my eldest brother of them—I mean my half brother from his marriage—knew that my dad had other kids. He's met us so he knows. But this brother says, 'How can you talk shit about my dad, blah blah blah.' And then I said 'I can prove to you that I'm not looking for anything, that I'm actually his daughter but I don't need to do that, whatever.

If you don't want to tell me who he is.' So I forgot about that. But then two months later I receive an email from my brother, the eldest brother, who knows about us. I'm sorry, my brother doesn't know about you guys, blah blah. I have a kid and I'm married now.' And I say, 'Okay, that's fine. How are you?' Just a polite exchange. And then a month after my dad emails me. 'my son gave me your email. How are you guys?'

In fact this story ended quite well with the father agreeing to start paying towards the children's education, a gesture which has become almost the bedrock of Filipino relationships based on remittances.

The situation becomes still more complex when one appreciates how often Filipinos also use their social network accounts for blogging purposes. Friendster and Multiply have a simple to use blogging facility now often regarded as an integral part of using the site. The boundaries between these categories of communication are fluid. Blogging within a social network site, which is what is being addressed here is not quite the same as the blogging that is usually considered under that term (Rettberg, 2008), and may feel somewhat more secluded and secure. On the other hand, Stefana Broadbent (pers. comm.) has found in her work on social network sites in Europe that most usage is one to one rather than public, and clearly the issue of this paper does not apply to such private usage, although Miller finds in using Facebook in the UK that people may be very concerned with issues arising from public profiles including the topic of this paper that is the collision with kinship (see also

Rettberg, 2008: 77-80) even if this does not dominate their day to day usage.

In the use of blogs within social networks in the Philippines, some users seem to regard these as simply as an efficient mode of communication. Instead of telling your problems to each of your friends repetitively you can just write them down once, and everyone can read about them. We may see this simultaneous one-to-many relationship as surprising compared to the more familiar one-to-one relationships. But as Miller and Slater (2000: 174-8) argued through their model of the expansive realisation, often new technologies are used to make possible something that existed previously as latent desire, but had no means of realising itself. Just because blogging is new doesn't make it in some sense unnatural.

The specific problem was the degree to which these bloggers used the media to specifically discuss their problems, including problems with absent parents. This makes a friends request from one's mother far more difficult to contemplate. Ricardo has been blogging for two years now, posting around once a week. He feels confident that his parents are not internet savvy enough to find the blog 'There are a lot of explicit personal references to my parents, so I'd be dead if they actually saw that'. For him blogging is firstly catharsis, being able to write about his intimate problems, more as in the traditional diary. The blog doesn't merely express ambivalence, but helps him try to resolve it. He has huge resentments about the way his father treats his mother and her failure to stand up to him, but also a general feeling that his parents only had him

as a vicarious expression of their own status. Yet he also wants their respect and affection. Blogging about such issues clearly makes them easier to live with.

The expression of these inner conflicts and problems exploits one of the key facets of text based media that constantly arose in our research. That many people claim they can write about things in text that they cannot say in words and especially cannot say face to face. But Ricardo is still thereby faced with the implications of the public nature of this discourse. Particularly acute since, unlike some social networking sites, the blogs in Friendster and Multiply are searchable with regular search engines. It is of course possible that in some way this exposure is both his ultimate fear but also his ultimate desire. Perhaps these are really the things he does want to say to his parents, but has never been able to and probably otherwise never would be able to say to them?

The contrast is with Charito who takes this a stage further in that the blog is actually directed at her parents and family and becomes what Ricardo may desire but cannot achieve; the means by which she can put things in the public domain, again exploiting her sense that she can express this better in text than in conversation.

Like when my dad hit my brother real hard, and I wanted to do something about it, I think this was within the year or last year. He was a teenager, and he failed to go home on time. Yeah, he went out with his friends. And then, my dad hit my brother and I wanted to stop him. And then I blogged about it. It was a pretty emotional blog. And then, when my mom and

my relatives from abroad read it, they were actually crying. I wasn't exaggerating. And they called me. My aunt from New York, and my dad's brother would say, 'you know, just understand your dad. He was from an abusive...'

There is an additional implication of using a blog as a means of washing the family's dirty linen in public. As with most people her age, the key relationships are equally with peers as with family. So these discussions are being shared simultaneously with friends, which is very likely why her family responds in phone calls and not on the blog itself. For her this was a natural extension of public discussion, since it was common for the blog to be the place where she and her peers talked about the teachers they hate or other classmates. Often these elicit immediate responses 'oh, I can relate! And you can actually post a similar blog, it happens all the time. And, you get to know and talk about it in real life. At times, we would actually sit down and talk about it.' Again this seems to be a case of the expansive realisation (Miller and Slater, 2000: 274-8) in that it may be better to see the blog as something latent in diary writing, but which required a new technology to come closer to the realisation of that desire for public expression. In assessing these discussions it should also be noted that boundaries between the private and public are often blurred in the Philippines and currently subject to change as a result of wider influences which would include these experiences of new technologies.

As in diary writing she continually oscillates between posting hate blogs about her father and blogs that talk

about how she accepts her family and how important it is that they are there to support her. For her, the advantage of the blog is that in real time it mimics her own constant movement between these feelings, both of which are true to her. They cannot be resolved, but they can, be equally expressed, and again she sees that as helpful in living with and through these contradictions. By contrast we may imagine that some of her transnational family see this as a disastrous shift from the time when teenagers largely turned their anxiety in upon themselves, and family abuse remained a private vice to be resolved within the family.

In other cases, however, the blogger wants things to remain within a tight private circle of friends and feel threatened by the potential presence of their mother or other relatives. One solution adopted by Ricardo is to differentiate his sites, making Multiply known to his parents. Here he posts photographs that he regards as 'parent safe.' But he would be devastated if his parents came across the Friendster or Facebook accounts which he sees as quite inappropriate. In fact he also splits other social networking sites, for example Facebook is orientated towards non-Filipino friends and Friendster is dominated by Filipino friends. This was not uncommon. Others used quite specific social networking sites such as gay dating sites with the assumption that these would not overlap with their use of other networks.

So far our example may seem easy to translate into norms and expectations within an almost universalised sense of contemporary parenting. What might be seen as acceptable and

unacceptable in many countries today. One could compare it to the issues of teenagers and parents that Horst (2010) has been studying in California for example. There is a common naïveté amongst young people when it comes to the possibility of their parents seeing what they have written. There are, however, clear differences in context. In the US there is usually a concern with achieving autonomy and with the latent power relations grounded in parental authority. By contrast, we are dealing with children who have been given more autonomy through parental absence than either side intended.

Furthermore, the Philippines is not some site of universal parenting norms. There are, in addition, some quite specific ideas and discourses about the nature of both relationships and of parenting. To appreciate this we can return to the earlier theoretical point about needing to determine both the normative foundation of a kin category and the behaviour of the particular people who happen to occupy them. Older anthropological studies this region of the Philippines highlighted two Tagalog concepts, starting from debates in the 1950s (e.g. Lynch and Guzman, 1974) and reprised in influential historical study by Rafael (1988). The two terms are *walang hiya* and *utang na loob*. *Walang hiya* translates roughly as to be without shame and is pretty much the worst possible thing a Filipino should be seen as exhibiting. *Utang na loob* by contrast is generally regarded as a positive trait, and refers to a particular kind of debt (*utang*) that is felt to be deep and interiorised. It may be the debt that it is incurred when someone goes well beyond the norms of kinship or

friendship in the help they have given you. It also corresponds to a sense of debt that all children are expected to have deep within themselves, to their parents that accrues simply by virtue of the fact that your life was given to you by them. The additional point about *utang na loob* is that it can therefore never be fully repaid.

These concepts help account for one of the most difficult instances of a mother making a friends request. Up to that point, the mother in question had done just about every wrong thing that a mother could. She had more or less abandoned her children; she had only intermittently kept in touch and only occasionally sent any kind of financial support. She only once ever returned to see them, for a month, with hardly any notice that she was returning. After which communication and money returned to being intermittent and unpredictable. Her son knew, for example, that at one point she received quite a large legacy that could have gone to her children, but she insisted that the entire sum went to her abroad and nothing to them.

So since she had left when he was an infant, her son's sole face to face experience of his mother was this single month return visit. He was well aware that there were mitigating circumstances, in that his mother had suffered considerable abuse which precipitated her leaving. Nevertheless none of these things seem to have marked her son as much as his subsequent encounter through Friendster. Several years after effectively losing contact he received, out of the blue a Friends invitation request to his Friendster account from his mother. It is hard to convey the way

he then spoke about what followed. Starved of knowledge about his mother, he immediately went to look at the pictures of his mother and her friends on her account. What he found there was much the like the social network sites of many people today; scenes in which they were often clearly drunk and disorderly. He also noted that some of them dressed in a way – and he could hardly bring himself to utter these words ‘like ...prostitutes’. The way he says this, the difficulty he has in saying this; we had the impression that this is something he has still not recovered from. No other point in our fieldwork so clearly enunciated the sense of a woman who was revealed to be *walang hiya*, without shame, pretty much the worst thing that one could think of one’s own mother.

But against *walang hiya* stands this other term, that of *utang na loob* - the debt due to one’s mother simply by virtue of her giving birth to you. At the time we encountered him, the son was again in communication with his mother. The circumstances were that his mother had maxed her credit cards and was begging her children for the money to help pay off her debts and avoid being thrown into prison. Despite everything that has happened, the son had absolutely no doubt that his priority in life at this moment is to save his mother from going to jail by somehow earning that money and sending it to her. In Filipino terms this demonstrates the potential of *utang na loob* to overtrump the evidence of *walang hiya*. The reason may be partly given by the theory of relationships we proposed. In her behaviour this mother has pretty much repudiated the role of mother as a given category. But the

son still desperately feels the need for a mother. So he employs an aspect of debt we have come to appreciate from the writings of Mauss (1954), but rarely encountered with this degree of nakedness, free of encumbering factors. Here debt, in and of itself, has the power to reconstitute his mother as mother, notwithstanding everything that she has done to him and not done for him. Since the debt is founded in a sense of biology (his own birth) it can possess resilience such that mere behaviour cannot deflect his construction. Despite *walang hiya*, neither she nor her son can escape from the fate imposed by *utang na loob*.

It does not follow, that all, or even most, of the relationships we studied are modelled upon these concepts. While everyone was well aware of them participants were quite explicit about not seeing their own relationships in these terms which they regarded as dated and old fashioned. The single most important medium through which the issue of absent parenting could be readily discussed came through the popularity of a Filipino film *Anak*. This film presents a quite extreme view of an adolescent daughter who with unwanted pregnancies, drugs, violence and abuse epitomises everything that would be connoted by the expression ‘totally fucked up’. Most of the film consists of the increasingly violent manner in which she blames all her problems on her mother’s absence while working in Hong Kong during critical periods of her growing up. With a somewhat unconvincing partial reconciliation between daughter and mother at the end. *Anak* is based almost entirely on more universal expectations of parenting and the consequences of

its absence. Since this is readily found in modern popular culture it is just as available as a discourse of normativity in parenting in the Philippines as are the terminologies of *walang hiya* and *utang na loob*. Filipino children readily understood themselves as being influenced by one more than the other.

Cutting the Filipino network

Underlying the situation are the factors that prevent mothers from returning to their children even when they would wish to do so. Constable (1999) notes how simply the experience of becoming used to another country together with the often greater freedom for women in places such as Hong Kong leads to an increasing ambivalence about the prospect of returning, corresponding to the 'myth of return' common to migrant populations (Anwar, 1979). This was confirmed in our research, where many mothers forged a strong relationship to the UK and used this to comparatively critique the situation in the Philippines.

Most, however, were committed to return to their children. The reason they have not and may never return becomes apparent in the light of Strathern's (1996) arguments about cutting the network. The Philippines is characterised by precisely the kind of bilateral kinship system discussed by Strathern. A particular characteristic of Filipino bilateral systems is that they foreground sibling relationships above all others (e.g. Cannell, 1999), which quickly leads to even more extended networks. The same concept of *utang* discussed in terms of the relationship between parents and children, can be appealed to by this very large potential

network of kin such as nieces and nephews as well as non kin (e.g. Johnson, 1997).

Perhaps the single biggest problem for Filipino migrants, apart from their separation from their children, is that leaving the country, so far from cutting the network, tends to do the very opposite. It actually accentuates the problems that Strathern theorises. Because an individual who works abroad becomes a potential resource for those living in the Philippines and over time more and more people find connections which they can appeal to in order to tap this resource. The classic statement by our participants is that they remain in the UK in order to earn money to send home for their relatives. Typically a sibling's child needs money to move from the public school system to a private school. Once they have finished resourcing these relatives they intend to retire back to the Philippines. But the combination of bilateral kinship and appeals to *utang* that links kin as obligation, means the stream of requests for help never ends. The network endlessly extends, with more people lining up to request money as soon as the last requests has been fulfilled (McKay, 2012).

Improvements in communications such as social networking sites then come to further exacerbate this problem and impede attempts to cut these networks, providing more and more ways for Filipinos to make requests to the Diaspora. At the same time, as this paper has argued, relationships that are constituted largely in conditions of absence, tend to idealise the category kin as normative categories. Diaspora Filipinos may become more sentimental about kinship ties which again adds

to the difficulty of repudiating them. Finally as McKay (2007) has argued money is itself regarded as an affective dimension, that is entirely appropriate for the expression of love and concern which comes together in ideals of obligation and debt. A situation very different from UK or US ideology which opposes monetary to affective relationships.

Of course, once they are in London Filipinos become aware of very different models of family relationships and expectations. Indeed there are indigenous alternatives also. MacKay (2009) is currently conducting a study of indigenous Filipino migrants who are members of several new, Protestant denominations. Most of these churches expect members to tithe, creating an additional demand on migrants' overseas earnings. They also discourage congregants from loaning or borrowing from moneylenders as they would do in the Philippines to cover their debts, or to donate towards rituals back home considered animist. As such they allow migrants to 'cut the network' of kinship and community by refusing demands to donate for particular rituals. Thus converting to the new, Protestant denominations can have a particular appeal for migrants who feel swamped by the demands emanating from home. This exemplifies Strathern's point about one form of networking effectively cutting that which was constituted by bilateral kinship.²

We can conclude with a similar point with regard to social networking sites. Perhaps of all the people we knew Rolando most clearly lived his life on Friendster. Aged 32 this went well beyond adolescent engagement.

He would go online pretty much as soon as he got up in the morning and from then on would be on the alert for anyone making any changes to their accounts, such as posting new pictures, which he would then go and look at. He has around 300 friends but also uses the privacy levels to differentiate their levels of access. He has a MySpace account but hardly uses it. This devotion to Friendster is part of a more general interest in computing. He desperately wanted to find a job in computing, but his family were now well established abroad. Although his mother was carrying out domestic work it was with very high status families and paid well. She pushed him into learning nursing, despite his lack of interest in such things, so that eventually he was able to come to London and join her.

It was he who persuaded his mother to join Friendster since for him that was the appropriate medium for any relationship based on constant communication. He set this up through video conferencing since she was unfamiliar with keyboards. His Friendster account was the centre of his social world within the Philippines. Only five of his 300 Friendster friends were living abroad. When he finally came to London, he spent most of his time online in his room. As he put it: 'I feel I'm in the Philippines with my friends. Because on Friendster at least, if someone has updated with other friends, it's in the same place, same location, all the pictures posted at the same time. So I'm feeling like I was there.'

On the other hand, he encountered something unprecedented after coming to the UK. Within the Philippines he

felt it was generally unacceptable for people to refuse a request to become a Friendster friend. But in the UK he found that there had quickly arisen a kind of diaspora class divide. Coming to the UK as the child of a domestic worker turned out to have consequences for his own status. 'It happens with so many people here, especially the nurses. They feel they're rich'. This unfriendliness extended to Friendster itself, where nurses would not accept friends requests from those associated with domestic worker. Suddenly, Friendster itself had ceased to be a seamlessly extending network.

Conclusion

We chose to work with Filipino migrants and their left behind children for several reasons. One was our concern for the welfare of such populations. There is a clear need for research that highlights this growth of dependency upon transnational communications in the modern world, as increasing numbers of migrants and others experience long term separation from their children. On narrower academic grounds we focused on the dialectical nature of this extreme case. Where a relationship is so dependent upon its media of communication this can throw light equally on what we understand as media and what we understand as a

relationship. To appreciate the impact of social networking sites requires us to reconsider familiar categories such as friend, but also mother.

What is highlighted by the title of this paper and its illustration in substantive ethnographic examples is the need to foreground the moment at which offline and online social networks are made visible to each other. Exactly as we would expect from reading Strathern it is this visibility that helps us to understand the nature of relationships and the extent to which the medium of objectification, including communicative media have become constitutive of what they are. The growth of social networking sites make these arguments, and the clash between networks visible, not just to the theorist or researcher, but increasingly to the participants, for whom the quintessential moment of revelation may often be the receipt of a request by one's mother to become ones friend.

Notes

¹We have italicised friends when referring to the terms as used specifically within the genre of social networking..

² It was McKay who first suggested to us that this situation corresponded to Strathern's arguments with regard to cutting the network and we are very grateful to her for this insight.

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