Mothering From a Distance: The Role of Technology and Digital Literacy Practices in Parenting Children ‘Left Behind’

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It is commonly believed that when immigrant carers arrive alone, and then settle, in a new country, to care for other people’s elderly parents or children, that they relinquish childrearing activities of their own. In some cases this may be true. But in my research, funded by the Economic Social Research Council in England, I have found the opposite case, confirming the results of other research on transnational conjugal relations, mothering and families, where it is seen as a rearrangement rather than abandonment (Parrenas 2005, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). With the advent of mobile phones and computers with chat features and webcams, in conjunction with high digital literacy skills among this population, immigrant parents can keep tabs on children’s school work, resolve family problems, all the while contributing to raising the quality of lives through remittances, from as far away as 6000 miles. But this is not without tensions. One study found that Bangladeshi fathers (and husbands) who worked in the construction industry in the Gulf made important household decisions and enforced them, often overriding their wives’ choices. Technology can be a powerful mediator in parenting practices.

While most mothers don’t choose to leave their children behind, they often have to in order to migrate for better paying jobs, where employers or the government do not sponsor or support family reunification. Many of these jobs are not “child-friendly” due to the unsocial and on-call hours that limit family time aside from the low rate of pay and dim promotion opportunities that lessen the quality of life. Many carers hope to someday return, or sponsor children to migrate, with the goal of giving them the best education and opportunities they can afford, as well as material comforts and save for their futures. In fact, many women may put their own professional careers, ones established in their native-born countries, on hold, when they find jobs as carers in capital-rich countries like the UK. Their sacrifices are not invisible to their children who may respond in different ways. Yet the popular media and the literature, in reproaching parents for leaving their children behind, and in upholding traditional views of families, neglect the new intimacy and relations that form across the miles. A recent popular film about a carer from the Philippines who moves to London, The Caregiver, shows a woman whose child has emotional scars due to her absence. While the film reveals the suffering of physical separation between them, it also reinforces the myth that children are damaged as a result of a particular type of parental contact and does not consider the novel qualitative exchanges that occur. This phenomenon has not been found to be true, for the most part, in this study.

1 Drawn from email correspondence with Dr. Nitya Rao, University of East Anglia, England

2 see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caregiver_(film)
Take an example of a Filipina carer who was a participant and whom I got to know well over the last three years: Annabelle. In 2006, when I interviewed Annabelle for the first time she confessed she was ‘smiling on the job but crying inside because I miss my children.’ She found the separation from the three of them to be unbearable and only wanted to keep busy to distract her from her pain. Her compensation over three years was to call and text them daily in Taglish, Tagalog, and British English to check on their whereabouts and to connect to them as well as she could, emotionally. Since her husband was a merchant seaman, the children stayed with her parents. While the changed dynamic produced some pressures after she left, when she reasserted her presence, albeit from a distance, her children responded as did others; it was a regular routine, for example, to discuss her children’s marks on the phone with her parents, the children, their teachers, and monitor their homework and after school activities. She wanted to make sure they were physically safe and carrying on well despite her not being there. Eventually she brought them, and her husband (who also worked as a carer) to England. The letters, phone calls and texts (in addition to emails, webcams, and electronic chatting that other mothers did) never fully substituted for being physically close to her children but they were ways to fill the gap of parental control and express her identity as their mother. The technology usage was a resilient strategy to stay in touch and to mother from a distance.

The new technology was used to stay close to children and monitor their well-being from a faraway place. Annabelle was not a distant mother, but mothered from a distance. There is a difference. Their connection was important in letting the children know that mom was still “here” although not physically present and that being in a transnational family could work. In the process of communicating with them through technologies, she built a type of ‘network capital’ (Urry 2007), which contributed to their multilingual enhancement and social development.

What the study also focused on, in following on from the work of Cox (2006), Parrenas (2005) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001), are the implications for the parents themselves, as they care for those who are local and abroad—those ‘cared-for’ in advanced economies are assumed to have more value and are therefore perceived as worth sacrificing those who need care in emerging countries. The former are also expected to be the first to be cared for, because of their physical proximity to the migrant carer. Indeed, and it was often the case that clients’ needs came first and caused tensions for the carers in staying in touch with family members when they were constantly pulled away. However it was not a simple formula and the women persisted. Phone calls were always rescheduled and texts were somehow afforded monetarily and across time and space.

References

For blog on school reform and technology


For additional information on the ESRC Home/Work study: [http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/homework/index.htm](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/homework/index.htm)

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