**BOOK CHAPTER**

# What is a mobile phone relationship?

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**Introduction**
A relationship that uses a mobile phone is not necessarily a mobile phone relationship. For example, a brother and sister living in London may develop a multifaceted relationship over fourteen years using many different media, and adopt mobile phones when they become cheap enough. This results in some minor changes, such as the micro-management of meetings in town, but these are generally insignificant when taken in the context of the relationship as a whole. By contrast let's imagine a relationship in the Philippines, (taken from the book TXT-ING Selves, Pertierra et al, 2002 and more recent literature that follows similar lines of enquiry, e.g. Ellwood-Clayton 2005, 2006, Pertierra 2005, Ramon 2006, Solis 2006). I can imagine a young woman just getting into the joys of texting. She likes the particular way it lends itself to short, ambiguous and suggestive as well as creative communication. At this stage she starts a texting relationship with a man she happened to meet when he overlooked her writing a text on a crowded bus. To be honest she had no real interest at all in the man at first. She simply wanted an excuse to practice and develop this new medium of texting. But one of the treats of texting was flirting, and after a while she began to enjoy his facility with flirtatious texts, and realised this was a man she had quite a bit in common with. They did meet from time to time, there was even a brief sexual relationship between them, but that didn't work out so well, and soon they resumed what basically brought them and kept them together, the joys of text.

My third example comes from my fieldwork in Jamaica (Horst and Miller 2006). A staunch Pentecostal woman loves bringing the word of Jesus to all and sundry, She also enjoys what Jamaicans call counselling based on her conviction that she is inspired from above. A chance miscall introduces her to a teenager, whose hesitant phone manner betrayed a fragility she seizes upon to initiate a long conversation about this teenagers problems including her child's babyfather who had betrayed her. This depth of confession and counselling might have been difficult if they had met face to face. But the anonymity and chance of this initial encounter led to a sustained exchange, even though the cost of the calls had an impact on both their budgets.

Which of these three cases is a mobile phone relationship? Not the first which just adds a rather inconsequential technology, of major interest to phone companies but not much to the participants. The second case is unequivocally a Mobile Phone relationship, as the primary concern is texting, and the other person is mostly there in order to facilitate the use of the phone; with the core relationship is to texting itself. The third case is more subtle. If we describe the second case using capital letters, we might say the third is not a Mobile Phone relationship, in that unlike the second case the relationship between

persons is not secondary to the relationship to the phone. But I think we could accept that it is a `mobile phone relationship' in that the phone is instrumental to the relationship and not just incidental to it. Furthermore this is by far the most common situation and the one I will focus upon in this paper. My point is that while it is tempting to concentrate on the most extreme phone focused relationships, generally it is more important to locate the phone as a significant but not determining aspect of relationships more generally. So our principle concern should be not with the relatively rare Mobile Phone relationship, which is mainly of interest to those who sell phones, but to the far more common mobile phone relationship where we cannot really distinguish between the social aspect and the mediation of the object in the relationship. But even to do this we need to consider what we mean by the term relationship.

In an ethnographic study I carried out with Heather Horst in Jamaica (Horst and Miller 2005, 2006), we found a local term *link-up* commonly employed for their most characteristic usage of the phone. *Link-up* comprises a very large number of very short conversations, in order to keep in occasional touch with the maximum number of people. This corresponds with earlier anthropological research that showed how Jamaicans knew of hundreds of people they would call relatives, though they might not make use of any particular connection until the need arose. Through our analysis of the content of mobile phone address books, we found that this was true not just of kin but of all relationships, since only 15% of names on address books were actually of relatives.

We recognized that linking-up developed on the basis of a prior pattern of Jamaican use of relationships. Typically a new media will be used first to address issues that were seen as already problematic in the field of communications and relationships. For example remittances certainly existed before the phone, but in the past they tended to be based on annual rituals such as Christmas rather than the specific ad hoc needs of recipients such as a medical emergency or a child needing money to go to school. The mobile phone allowed for a considerable refinement of the remittance system, making it more responsive, especially because it was connected with another form of communication - Western Union money transfer. A second example would be the problematic relationship between baby-fathers and baby-mothers. This is a country where most children are born to unmarried couples and when children are young the baby-father does not normally cohabit with the baby-mother. Here the phone became very important in the everyday struggle of baby-mothers to solicit support for children from absent baby-fathers.

The results from Jamaica bring together two theoretical propositions that will be developed further in this paper. The first is the tendency to use the new technology to try and reduce discrepancies between the normative expectation of what a relationship is supposed to be, for example with babyfathers, and what one's babyfather is actually like. This will be developed into a full theory of relationships. Secondly, the examples also exemplify a theory I developed with Don Slater and is presented in our earlier book on the media *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach,* (Miller and Slater 2000). Here we argued that most often the effect of the internet was not to create something totally new, nor to be merely the continuation of some form of communication that previously existed. Rather, we argued that the internet's initial impact was largely to help deal with some failure or frustration that was already evident in the prior medium of communication. Likewise with the phone, one can get just the right form of relationship.

We are all interested in what we mean by a mobile phone, but I want to take a bit of time to also consider abstractly the other part of this equation. The question of what we mean by a relationship. One might think that the question of what we mean by the word relationship would have spawned a very extensive literature. But actually it is quite hard to tease out any kind of working definition of the term that we could easily appropriate to ask these important questions about the mobile phone. In a separate paper (Miller 2007) I examine several disciplines from philosophy to anthropology and psychology to consider what the word relationship means within each. To summarize these findings most of the relevant literatures are not descriptions of relationships as part of day to day life, but are largely normative, that is ways of creating ideal or moral models of what any given relationship should be like. Philosophers such as Aristotle (1955, see also Cicero 1923, Pangle 2003) write less about friendship as experienced and much more about what an ideal friendship might be. Pyschologists are concerned largely when people do not conform to what they regard as essential attributes of being a mother (see Bowlby 2005. There is a consequence to these findings. Philosophers and psychologists create models of how relationshis are supposed to be and in turn these literatures affect us in our daily lives through the inculcation of such moral and idealized models. They may not come to us as some kind of abstract discourse of philosophy, but as Foucault argued, discourse may be embedded in more mundane forms. Take, for example, television. Many countries relay what have become the classic US sitcoms as part of the daily fare of television, whether the Cosby Show, Roseanne or cartoons such as The Simpsons. All of these are set in family situations. All of them share a basic message, which is that although the actual persons may be commonly dysfunctional, difficult and wrong, there is an underlying warmth, compassion, and support that is based on a shared ideology about the idealized normative roles expected of family relationships.

The literature on relationships suggest a powerful element of normative morality that is more concerned with the ideals of relationships than their practice. This observation forms part of my own theory of relationships, which I originally developed in *The Dialectics of Shopping* (Miller: 2001). This was based on a year's study of shopping on a single street in North London. My argument is that we live in a society with clear normative expectations of a series of roles and relationships that continue to matter a great deal to us. Being a parent or sibling or husband, consists of a whole series of expectations and idealisations of what the person who occupies that role should be like and how they should behave to us. But it is accompanied today by ever increasing diversity of actual relationships and behaviour and experiences of the ways we treat each other.

So on the one hand the literature and representation of relationships place emphasis upon the normative, and on the other there is ethnography of actual relationships as they occur or equally fail to occur. What the ethnography has to take into account is that often central to the observed behavior is the way people themselves confront or deal with these contradictions. The comparative study of relationships in the various disciplinary literatures seems to bolster my own theory which is that the word relationship almost always implies a basic contradiction between its own normative aspect - the ideal that we ascribe to that category of person or thing - and the actual entity that constitutes that thing or person at the time. I now want to see how this theory might be applied to an understanding of the use of the mobile phone in the Philippines. My argument will be that only by understanding this particular feature of relationships more generally can we explain an unexpected finding with regard to the use of the phone. That it does not necessarily bring families together in the way we might have expected.

**Filipino separated families**
Together with Mirca Madianou of the University of Cambridge, I am embarking on a study of long distance relationships, specifically those of separated families and couples, and the ability of particular media to sustain those relationships over time. The core of this study will be a focus on Philippine and Caribbean relationships and the very specific question of what kind of mobile phone relationships develop in the situation of separated Filipino families. In this case we are concentrating on the very specific circumstance of how relationships are maintained in long-term separated families, which is why the focus is on a mobile-phone relationship in its own right.

I want to first consider some issues that arise out of current work on the mobile phone in the Philippines and then concentrate on a core study of these transnational relationships by the anthropologist Parrenas. If one looks at the early examples of the use of the phone during long distance relationships, this was often seen as a rare and special event, often therefore an occasion for ritual with many associated formalities. There is an extraordinarily funny and moving description of long distance telephone calls between family members given in the autobiography of the Isreali writer Amos Oz in his *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Oz 2004: 7-11) in which exactly the same formula of words is used every time they speak. They greet each other the same way, have formalized words that basically imply everything is fine and nothing has changed, but they still dress up to go and travel in order to make the phone call and have ritualized the action itself as special. There is almost no informational content actually exchanged during these occasional phone calls.

At the other end of the spectrum are the mobile phone relationships that are being extensively studied in the Philippines which depend on the incredible frequency and routine nature of such calls today, especially through texting. The fascination in this work is with that extreme state of the mobile phone relationship where it seems the person is almost subservient to the relationship to the phone itself. The literature that has grown on Filipino texting since the original TXT-ING Selves book (Pertierra et al 2002 ) shows a wide range of highly creative uses of texting, that extend in particular various forms of flirtation and love (e.g. Ellwood-Clayton 2005, 2006, Solis 2006) and social networking more generally, including relationships to politics and to religion (Pertierra 2005, Ramon 2006). These papers suggest that mobile phones both extend the possibilities for making and also unmaking unconventional relationships, but also suggest the importance of the relationship to the phone and the various skills of texting. Indeed, based on this literature, some women find that actually having to interact with some men really takes away from the much more idealized, enjoyable, and satisfying genre of banter and flirtation through creative texting with men. A similar issue arose with a friend who was conducting an intense romantic relationship by internet. He was desperate to meet up, but she simply didn't know how satisfactory this would be, since she couldn't know how much her relationship was to the man himself, or to the passion and intensity of the internet relationship which had revealed itself to have all sort of libratory potentially for erotic and free expression that might be more constrained in face to face contact. As Wilding (2006) notes each media provides for its own genre of transnational communication.  The mobile phone has to be situated within this proliferation of media genres, including the differences between texting and voice calls.

My starting point in turning more specifically to the case of the transnational family is the work of the anthropologist Parreñas and her books and papers (2001, 2005a, 2005b) on

the more general aspects of these relationships, as well as an important study by Pingol of husbands left behind in one region of the Philippines (Pingol 2001). Much of' Parreñas' concern is with political, economic and gender issues, but I want to concentrate on the more personal aspects of these relationships, the nature of the love itself that is central to these relationships, and the contradictions of the intimate. In her second book *Children of Global Migration* (2005a) Parreñas examines a fundamental problem created for families by Philippine migration that was the case long before the development of either mobile phones or affordable internet access. She notes there are approximately 9 million Filipino children under 18 with at least one parent abroad as migrant labour (2005a: 12). This represents 27% of the youth population (2005b: 317).

It seems quite clear from Parreñas that she had certain expectations of what she was going to find, or more particularly what she wanted to find. One might think that this situation exeplifies extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice, particularly when we consider mothers who are choosing to work abroad. Parreñas shows that in her sample the average mother spent only 23.9 weeks out of the last 11 years with their children. Fathers spent rather more time back at home since their work allowed more time off. That means that the mothers in question basically did not see their children grow up. The mothers gave their reasons for taking up this work largely in terms of the children's welfare, such as to support their education, medical bills and augment income more generally. The expectation was that the rise of regular and cheap communication would help to ameliorate the negative consequences of this separation, and enable the children to feel close again to their mothers and to better understand and appreciate their condition. She also anticipated that they would be influenced by the more egalitarian and modernist forms of gender relations by which the father would take on more domestic roles, in recognition of the mother taking on more of the traditionally male role of the breadwinner.

However, most of the detailed description and analysis that is found in Parreñas' book is about how these expectations are not fulfilled. The reason for this, I would argue becomes much clearer in terms of the theory of relationships I have just described. What tends to happen is that the period of separation simply exacerbates the distinction between the idealized norms represented by mother and child, and the actual relationship, which here is significantly diminished. These norms are held both individually and collectively. As a result, the proximity afforded by the development of mobile phones, if anything reinforces the most conservative and traditional gender ideals about relationships and leads many of these children to concentrate less on the material benefits that accrue to them and more on the sense of abandonment by their mothers.

At a collective level, Parreñas shows there is a dismal view taken of the families where mothers have gone to work in other countries and leave their children behind (2005a: chapter two). These families tend to be stigmatized within the Philippines. It is generally assumed that children growing up without their mother are more likely to be badly behaved and involved in crime and other misdemeanors than a child with the full support of a conventional family. Parreñas suggests from her evidence that this is not actually the case, but it is quite clear that this is believed to be the case, with much media attention to this as a social problem. Children are often taunted about the behaviour of their mothers. Official groups don't help by also condemning it. There is a lack of support groups and lack of help from fathers (2005a139-40). In a similar way Pingol (2001) shows husbands left behind who take on female associated activities of household and

childrearing are taunted mercilessly by, for example, female students for this potential loss of masculinity, and constantly try but fail to persuade their wives to return.

Particularly problematic are the views of the children themselves (Parreñas 2005a: chapter six). In almost every case the children focus on the sense that they have been abandoned. In response to this the mothers use the increased possibility of phone communication, more or less as might be expected: to return to what Parreñas refers to as highly intensive mothering. For example, some mothers phone every morning to make sure their children are getting ready for school (2005b: 328). Pertierra suggests these women strive to maintain an "absent presence" within their home communities (2005: 26). For example Parrañes (2005b) shows how women working abroad retain their traditional control over financial matters at home by using these long distance communication devices.

Despite all this, the children regard the separation as irrevocable and say they will never again be really close to their mothers. As one child puts it, "telephone calls. That's not enough. You cannot hug her, kiss her, feel her, everything. You cannot feel her presence. Its just words you have" (2005a:127). So increasing the frequency of phone calls can have the opposite to the intended effect: " regardless of the efforts of mothers to maintain open and regular communication with them,.. ironically also reinforces the idealisation of stay-at-home mothers" (129). To appreciate this failure of increased mobile phone use we have to note that even mothers who return home more frequently are not necessarily regarded as better mothers (129). By contrast, it is perfectly possible for fathers to be seen as behaving adequately in just keeping in touch by phone, unlike mothers, because for fathers this more occasional or distant relationship is closer to the normative expectations of fathers.

Another example of the failure of mobile phones in long distance relationships has to do with threatened traditional gender roles. The fathers feel in danger of being seen as emasculated because their wives are now taking on so much of the traditional male role of bread winner, which is one of the reasons they often refuse to take over some of the female responsibilities for personal and emotional care of the children. Pingol (2001) documents the considerable range of potential reactions to this situation, based on the tension between traditional males roles as respectable or rogue, but here with the additional possibility of appropriating a more feminine close affection and bond with the children. Again, increasing frequency of phone contact may have ambiguous consequences for the fathers. Previously, a general fear of potential sexual infidelity could be suppressed partly because of cover of distance, but when one can potentially phone several times a day, at least in some cases the phone can itself waken a much more active jealous fear of what exactly one's wife is doing at any particular time.

There is much evidence that although now abroad the mothers take on an even more gendered, essentially disciplinary, role with respect to the treatment of their children (2005a: Chapter Five). The children also tend to see their mothers as behaving inappropriately and therefore not as real mothers. Parreñas (2005a: 112-118) provides considerable evidence that female extended family relatives who sometimes spend more care and attention on these children than mothers might have done are not seen as true substitutes for actual mothers. This is notwithstanding that the children are well aware of all the material benefits of their mothers being abroad, including often a better house, better schooling and money for such things as clothes and cinema and good food.

Parreňas seems often bewildered by her results and laments the conservatism of Philippine gender distinctions. Her detailed and empathetic account, however, makes clear the contradictions that this situation has given rise to, which often comes across as poignant or indeed tragic. But from a theoretical perspective what becomes clear is that where relationships tend to be focused on discrepancies between actual and normative models of those relationships, then it is perhaps not surprising that a situation such as this, which exacerbates that distinction, results in increased anxiety about the relationship itself, and an overwhelming emphasis on the normative rather than the actual behaviour of those involved.

What is equally clear is that in this scenario, the increasing intensity of the use of mobile phones does not have the predicted results: It does not bring the relationship closer. This is because mobile phone relationships cannot be understood without paying detailed attention to the nature of the relationship, and indeed ultimately to the theorising of what relationships in general are. Indeed there are other even deeper issues raised here that I hope to address in future work. Given the mothers are often leaving quite young children, who is it they are actually going abroad to help? Clearly, the younger the child, the more they are likely to represent a projected ideal of the child one gives love and life for, rather than a specific child in terms of their particular behavior and character. So it is quite possible that the reification of the normative is as much reinforced in the mother by her continued absence as it is for the child. The child therefore becomes even more idealised as a pure deserving object of self-sacrifice. In situations where the two actually spend time together, these ideals might be more tempered by, for example, the problematic aspect of behavior that parents will always find in their children.

In my original study of shopping in north London, these issues became very evident (Miller 2001). To my surprise I found that generally mothers didn't like shopping with their children by their side. The reason for this was that shopping was an act of love and care in which women gave considerable time and labour. They naturally justified this in terms of their deserving and beloved children. The trouble was that when the children themselves went shopping, they often got bored, behaved badly and demonstrated that they really didn't care very much about the level of choice their mother was making as an expression of her love for them. In other words it was much easier to fantasize about ones wonderful and fully deserving children when they were not actually with you. You shopped more for the idealized relationship than the actual child. By studying consumption in London, it was evident that the relationship between mother and child develops quite slowly in terms of the balance between this projected and actual behavior, and which ultimately develops as a more mature and reciprocal relationship (Miller 1997). This again shows why in the Philippine situation more frequent contact between mother and child by phone may have quite unexpected effects, such as, for example, making the child seem less worthy as the deserving recipient of this abstract ideal of self-sacrifice. Madianou has been writing most recently on the emotional response to media and I suspect this will provide a considerable addition to understanding the nuances of these contradictions with endless possibilities of guilt, jealousy, anger, love and mourning for loss.

To conclude. I started this paper with what seemed like a simple account of what we might mean by a mobile phone relationship. The temptation in such studies is to think that the most important and interesting findings are represented by that relationship which is most fully constituted by the mobile phone itself. We are fascinated by those cases where the person seems to take second place to the phone. My argument in this

paper is the opposite: That to best understand the huge significance of the mobile phone in developing mobile phone relationships, we need to pay at least as much attention to the nature of the relationship as to the nature of the mobile phone. Once we start to look more closely at what we mean by the word relationship we find that it contains many contradictions, and by choosing to focus on the example of Filipino mothers who are separated for many years from their children, these contradictions are particularly evident and very likely particularly poignant. It is the properties of these relationships, not the phone, itself that explain the outcome of increased use of the phone.

This is the point of a material culture approach. We start by thinking the distinction is between a relationship to an object (the phone), or a subject (the person), but then we start to see how relationships with persons all have their more individualized subject and generic object tension within themselves. Persons are often reduced to object like phenomenon, even without the consideration of the phone object as a medium within that relationship. So a mobile phone relationship becomes a player in issues of the tragic and the aspirational, the formal and the informal, the ideal of love and bitterness of separation, but also maybe the bitterness of love and the ideal of separation. I simply don't know, prior to carrying out our own research how such things emerge and develop, but in future work and alongside some of the other contributors to this volume, we aim to find out.

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