ICT-based co-presence in transnational families and communities: challenging the premise of face-to-face proximity in sustaining relationships

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Migration and the impact of new media

It is now well documented that the experience of migration has undergone a radical transformation in recent decades, notably with the emergence of transnational modes of sociality in both families and communities. The processes of migration have always challenged the taken-for-granted assumption that physical proximity is necessary for the maintenance of significant social ties. Now, more than ever before, the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and new media environments has begun to challenge the premise that strong relationships require face-to-face inter-actions. Even more than affordable travel, it is the expansion and enhancement of technologies of communication such as the internet, smartphones and social media that have contributed to the recent, startling emergence of a new social environment of ubiquitous connectivity.

This new social reality transforms sociality in (post)modern societies in complex ways. To reflect these transformations, a new lexicon has begun to develop that charts the social impacts of new applications of such technologies. The important work of Castells (1996) on the 'network society' points to the ways in which communication

technologies support more frequent and more diverse connections across time and space. More recently, further nuance has been developed in understanding the impact of ICTs on the experience and practice of relationships. Notions like 'connected presence' (Licoppe 2004) highlight the ways in which the capacity to connect with others has resulted in an ongoing practice of connecting to others, in various manners. The concept of 'mobile lives' (Elliott and Urry 2010) refers to the ways in which people manage their everyday mobility without necessarily sacrificing their sense of connecting to significant others. The idea of 'bounded sociality' (Ling 2008) emphasizes the fact that not only geographic proximity, but also close relationships are shaping the ways in which technologies are used to sustain relationships. Such concepts help to articulate how social life is no longer conducted wholly in place, within neat physical and territorial boundaries, but rather must now be conceived of as incorporating distant ties and connections.

The authors of this special issue explore how communication technologies are transforming ways of 'being together' and forms of 'co-presence' in families and communities separated by distance and over time. The concept of 'ICT-based co-presence' is used to capture and explore the diverse ways in which people maintain a sense of 'being there' for each other across distance. Emerging scholarship reveals that the intensive use of internet-based communication, mobile phones and social media can contribute to strengthening ties and intensifying the circulation of various (cultural, emotional, economic and social) resources within transnational families (Madianou and Miller 2012). The uses of these technologies may also facilitate intergenerational solidarities at a distance, expanding transnational emotional and other forms of support.

This is not to suggest that such transnational forms of caregiving are evenly distributed and shared. Rather, the exchange of support in transnational families is characterized by the asymmetrical reciprocal exchanges that define all intimate social relationships. Nor is it to suggest that all transnational relationships take the same form or have the same impact. One of the questions that is raised by the transnational experience produced by new technologies is just how effective these transnational forms of exchanges are in approximating or 'standing in for' the physical co-presence and 'being there' that has long been taken for granted as the bedrock of family and other significant relationships.

Throughout this issue, detailed ethnographic case studies illustrate the social uses of new technologies in migrant, as well as transnational family and community contexts, using these richly described examples to develop theories to better understand the transformation of transnational family life by ICTs. Key issues include: how do transnational families use a range of ICTs to re-create 'being together', 'being there' and the experience of 'co-presence' in everyday life? How might we define 'co-presence' in transnational settings, and what are its heuristic contributions and constraints? What norms and expectations (in terms of empowerment, emotional resilience, control, emotional pressure, and so forth) are created by the new possibilities for co-presence? What are the benefits and limits of ICT-based co-presence within transnational families?

Transnational family life and the emergence of distant co-presence

Transnational family life is considerably enhanced by, if not completely dependent upon, the emergence of new ICTs. The 'double absent' migrant, who is 'neither here nor there' (Sayad 1999), has now been replaced by the 'connected migrant' (Diminescu 2005) and the 'online migrant' (Nedelcu 2009). These new figures embody complex social mutations enabled by two crucial features of contemporary social worlds – mobility, on the one hand, and ICTs on the other. They arguably represent a new ideal-type actor of twenty-first-century modernity, one who is able to develop and master 'new geographies of everyday life' (Nedelcu 2012) and dramatically challenge the patterns of social relationships based on proximity and face-to-face interaction. While ICTs play an increasingly important role in sustaining proximate family and friendship relations, they are essential to the circulation of transnational or 'distant' care. As the articles in this collection attest, they do so by providing new possibilities for sustaining intimacy across time and space, providing revolutionary and ever more sophisticated avenues for the exchange of emotional support and for delivering a sense of emotional closeness or 'being present' across distance. Importantly, this sense of presence relies upon the emergence of what Madianou and Miller (2012: 8) have termed polymedia, a technological context 'of proliferating communicative opportunities' that supports 'multiple alternatives within an integrated communicative structure [that] leads to a different environment for relationships themselves' (2012: 14). That is, the proliferation of media for interpersonal communication appears to have transformed the very experience, purpose and outcomes of those communications, producing new opportunities for intimacy and for the transformation of intimate subjectivities.

Reflecting this reality, a new 'theory of mediated relationships' serves to explain the co-determination of social relationships and communication technologies. On the one hand, polymedia regimes generate new forms of co-presence as 'they can make the absent other "tangible"' (Madianou and Miller 2012: 144), demystifying physical presence as an inescapable condition for social relationships to exist. On the other hand, communication technologies are largely socialized within the relationships that they mediate. The emerging 'polymedia environment' (Madianou and Miller 2012), then, is both produced by relational contexts, and is also transforming the ways in which kin and kin-like caring relationships are experienced and practised (Baldassar and Merla 2014). Yet, while the modes of communication and the possibilities of connection have changed dramatically over the last generation, the structures, processes and expectations of family relationships remain largely unchanged. Indeed, new technologies are arguably most commonly drawn into the service of reproducing the ties, obligations and expectations associated with proximate family relationships – including mother–child, grandparenting and cousin relationships.

Thus, although it has been argued that polymedia offers 'the ideal distance for the development of pure relationships' (Madianou and Miller 2012: 150), whether these forms of co-presence constitute new forms is a question debated in this special issue. Do these new opportunities to experience co-presence afford new types of reciprocities? What are the attendant obligations that are facilitating increasingly dynamic and

multifaceted relationships across distance? To what extent do they reflect an actualization of the expectations of solidarity within migrant family networks and what are the norms underlying these expectations?

Conceptualizing co-presence across distance

This special issue builds on and more clearly identifies the links between an already substantial body of work to which the editors have contributed. Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding (2007) applied Finch and Mason's (1993) work on (non-migrant) family obligations to demonstrate the ways in which transnational family relationships are shaped by personal, kinship and social histories of support and connection. That is, the context of migration and communication does not determine the experience of the relationships of support that are sustained over time and place. Rather, they are built on and layered by histories of relationships and cultural and structural models of gendered and age-specific roles, which shape expectations and obligations in the present. Nevertheless, it is also true that the modes of communication available are an important part of this complex picture. Thus, Wilding (2006) argues that the shift in the 1980s from relying primarily on letters to making use of a range of communication technologies created a change not only in the mode of communication, but also in the content, purpose and experience of the relationships that are supported by those communications. The infrequent letters created opportunities for idealizing a family, a nation and a relationship. There were opportunities to smooth over the narrative of a family's history and its members daily activities. In contrast, the recent emergence of ubiquitous connectivity brings the mundane into sharper focus, ensuring attention to the minute detail of daily life at the expense of a more imaginative narrative.

This goes hand in hand with a considerable transformation of the ways in which separation and distance from country of origin and family left behind are experienced in general, concomitantly with a continuous updating of migrants' critical sense of cultural, social and political belongings and transnational family patterns (Nedelcu 2013). Whereas the infrequent letter was an important means of maintaining a sense of having a family, it did not impose the same obligations to keep in touch and provide support that were produced by more regular, synchronous forms of communication. It was with the emergence of more frequent, multi-sensory modes of communication such as the telephone that any sense of co-presence became a likelihood. With polymedia, that possibility increasingly changed into reality.

In her recent work, Nedelcu (2009, 2012) argues that ICTs generate qualitatively new ways of living together at a distance in migration contexts. Her analysis of Romanian migrants in Canada reveals how transnational ICT-mediated practices provide the premise for a 'transnational everyday reality' to emerge, which is 'based on ubiquity, simultaneity and immediacy of interaction over borders' (2012: 1346). Such technologies are the foundation of transnational lifestyles and processes of socialization across borders that take place within transnational families. Thus, both migrants and non-migrants are participants in a process of deterritorialization of the 'social fabric' that generates a new transnational habitus; family members use

ubiquitous ICT-based co-presence regimes to manage their multiple belongings, learn to live with a multiple sense of self and take advantage of a new culture of difference and otherness. In this process, transnational families represent 'the exemplary social matrix generating new patterns of socialization' (2012: 1345) in which proximity and face-to-face relationships are challenged by distance, ICT-based interactions and co-presence; although this does not necessarily mean that family values have dramatically changed in the digital era.

In her analysis of the century-long history of migration from Italy to Australia, Baldassar (2016a, 2016b), like Nedelcu, also argues that co-presence across distance can result in qualitatively different transnational family caregiving relationships. She compares the changes in the methods, modes and meanings of 'keeping in touch' over time and argues that a key difference in the type of co-presence possible in the different migrant cohorts is whether there is access to synchronous or asynchronous forms of communication. The emotional/affective transnational imaginary that characterized the pre-war cohorts and asynchronous pre-polymedia contexts were constituted by the shared family project of migration and were sustained by the exchange of letters, the sending of remittances and rare but longed for visits and repatriations. Corroborating Wilding's (2006) findings, the forms of co-presence created in these contexts were mostly imagined and risked becoming attenuated, as migrants and their distant loved ones relied on modes of exchange that, over time, tended to deliver increasingly vague and impressionistic experiences of each other, although co-presence could always be open to revitalization. In stark contrast, the transnational imaginary that characterizes the distant family relations of the more recent cohorts is constituted by polymedia environments that facilitate synchronous co-presence in which a form of self that more closely approximates the actual self can be exchanged, along with the possibility of a continuous feeling of being there for, and co-present with, each other (Madianou and Miller 2012).

In a more in-depth earlier work, Baldassar (2008) identified four types of co-presence that can be experienced by transnational family members – physical, virtual, proxy and imagined. She argued that *virtual* forms of co-presence are commonly constructed through the sense of hearing – either directly by verbal exchanges on the telephone and/or webcam, which also provides the sense of sight – or indirectly by reading communications in the form of written words on email or SMS messages. Co-presence by *proxy* is achieved indirectly through special transnational objects, as well as through people, whose physical presence embodies the spirit of the longed for absent person or place. Each of the five senses can be utilized to construct this form of presence (the person or object can be touched, heard, seen, and so on), although, the physical manifestation of this (proxy) presence serves as the abstraction of an imagined presence. Hence, *imagined* co-presence refers to the sense of togetherness that people feel and believe they share even when they are not actively engaged in communication with each other and is arguably a dimension of each of the other forms described. The act of remembering family (both proximate and distant) in nightly prayers is one example of this imagined co-presence. Baldassar points out that while virtual and proxy forms of co-presence are highly valued, *physical* co-presence remains the gold

standard; actually being bodily present with the longed for person or in the longed for place so as to experience them fully, with all five senses.

These considerations support the idea that the increasing possibilities of 'doing' family in a virtual environment do not undermine the importance of face-to-face sociability. They also alert us to the significance of local material and political contexts. In other words, virtual worlds are not necessarily deterritorialized. Here, Kilkey and Merla's (2014) notion of 'situated transnationalism' reminds us that the possibility to engage in transnational family practices, and the forms that these will take, including virtual, are largely dependent on the local institutional contexts in which people are located. Policies regarding the development of communication infrastructures, their quality and accessibility are of course of crucial importance, as they shape the techno-logical context in which people are placed. But beyond access and affordability, sus-taining family relations across national borders through ICTs also requires a series of other resources (financial, educational, social, technological, as well as time) that are largely constituted through the migration, welfare and employment regimes of home and host countries (Merla 2014; Wilding and Gifford 2013). Transnational family mem-bers develop practices and strategies to overcome the obstacles they face in keeping their family relationships alive and active (Merla 2015), including engaging in innova-tive, creative digital practices, as several contributions to this special issue reveal.

Towards a more precise conceptualization of ICT-based co-presence

The present collection of articles builds on these earlier achievements and aims to theorize how ICTs and new media and polymedia environments are profoundly impact-ing on the ways transnational family and community members experience each other despite distance and how they can be together across distance; thus, recognizing ICTs to be an increasingly critical component in the analysis of migration and transnational family relationships. The idea for this special issue emerged from a workshop entitled 'Migration, Families and ICTs' hosted by the 2012 IMISCOE conference in Amsterdam in which the editors participated. A central theme running through the various contributions to the workshop was the question of how migrants experienced and maintained a sense of being there for each other and of being together across distance. Presenters were invited to refine their paper with the conceptualization of ICT-based co-presence as the central theme.

In this special issue, the concept of ICT-based co-presence is re-examined and elaborated, further distinguishing between the different experiences of co-presence that are generated out of diverse contexts and modes of connectivity. Madianou, for example, identifies the role of '*ambient* co-presence', a particular form of co-presence facilitated by polymedia environments. She observes that smartphones and wireless connections create an 'always on' culture that is fed by the peripheral awareness of distant others through social networking sites. Ambient co-presence is characterized by this ongoing awareness of distant others, both in families and in communities, that is produced in spite of irregular or absent face-to-face contact. Madianou describes it as 'peripheral', which is not intended to suggest that ambient co-presence is limited to

those who are peripheral or insignificant in a social network. Indeed, ambient co-presence is described as an 'intense' yet peripheral experience. Thus, the concept is intended to highlight the ways in which some of our most significant relationships can be peripheral to the practices of our everyday lives, even as they provide the foundations and backdrop of that everyday life. Ambient co-presence has the positive effect of enhancing people's sense of belonging. Yet, it also has important social surveillance implications, and can result in increased levels of conflict, particularly for those who already have weak or unstable relationships. Here it is the existing quality of the relationship that shapes the impact of ICTs on family relations, rather than the opposite. Social networking sites are particularly important in the production of ambient co-presence, enabling family networks to retain a sense of familyhood without relying on physical proximity.

In their article, Nedelcu and Wyss show how 'polymedia environments' lead to the emergence of '*ordinary* co-presence' routines that nourish a sense of continuously 'doing family' across distance within transnational families. These routines differentiate into three types – *ritual*, *omnipresent* and *reinforced*, depending on the intensity, the content and the meaning of the ICT-based communications. They are at the core of everyday family practices, generating ambivalent effects, which mix immediate feelings of reciprocal wellbeing with new expectations of solidarity and care. These everyday practices of staying in touch create meaningful relationships even when the content of the exchanges is not especially meaningful. The authors claim that these new communication patterns within transnational families are quite similar to interactions in a context of physical proximity, generating a sense of ongoing belonging and diminishing/erasing geographical and emotional discontinuities. In this way, routines of ordinary co-presence reflect the inherent features of the 'everyday', the 'regular' and the 'fluidity' of 'doing family' processes within migrant transnational families, which function as 'normal' families. These findings challenge the understanding of family as a process based on face-to-face routines and interactions. Therefore, Nedelcu and Wyss argue that distance/separation and ICT-mediated co-presence need to be seen as two intertwined facets of contemporary families, which also mirror the actual norms and values of family life. Nevertheless, they also put into perspective the role and the impact of a censorship state on the development of polymedia infrastructures in Romania; and more generally, the role of structural (politic and technological) conditions, which can dramatically restrict or stimulate transnational family communications.

Robertson, Wilding and Gifford introduce the term '*imaginary* co-presence' as a way of accounting for the uses of communication technologies to construct a 'sense' of family relations when interaction with family members becomes impossible. They document the experience of resettled refugees, a group whose situation might benefit most from new technologies for communicating across distance, but whose capacity to communicate with family members in camps and in precarious situations remains severely limited by digital divides that continue to shape who is able to benefit from the full range of new ICTs (Ragnedda and Muschert 2013; Wilding and Gifford 2013). The refugee family experience of transnationalism is generated out of forced separation, in which there are few opportunities to reunite. This presents particular challenges for maintaining family connections. Under these conditions, sustaining 'connected

presence' and producing co-presence are extremely difficult. Yet, their article demonstrates that co-presence is not abandoned altogether. Using digital photography, young people from Karen refugee backgrounds living in Melbourne actively produce an alternative mode of 'connected presence' that is based on subtle experiences of togetherness produced across long periods of forced separation. While 'being with' family is not possible, what the young people produce is a 'sense of being with' (Zhao 2003) their distant kin. In the process, they create a family imaginary even under conditions when all mediated and physical forms of co-present interaction are unavailable, potentially permanently.

In addition to different modes of co-presence, the authors in this special issue also identify different qualities of ICT-based co-presence. Gordano Peile, for example, analyses the marketing campaigns directed at migrants' use of communication devices and money transfer technologies in Spain, and identifies two representations of co-presence in these campaigns – '*hard*' and '*soft*' co-presence – depending on whether or not the advertisements acknowledged physical distance. Her analysis brings to the fore the relevance of analysing the providers of mobile phone and money transfer services as 'new actors in the study of migration'. Indeed, they create an emerging migration industry of connectivity, where transnational families are represented in the public sphere through aestheticized corporate discourses that are quite different from the political and mass media images to which we are accustomed. Here migrants' involvement in transnational care practices and need to keep in touch with relatives are taken for granted, and serve as a basis for their recruitment as customers of services that are presented as being precisely aimed at supporting (and enriching) transnational communication. However, they also reinforce migrants' sense of obligation to provide care to their distant relatives, by conveying a stereotypical representation of transnational care as a one-way process between 'active' migrants and 'passive' nonmigrants (for example, elders and children).

Baldassar further develops our understanding of co-presence, contributing to the de-demonization of distance in transnational family life. Responding to Madianou and Miller's (2012) call for research on middle-class families with high levels of access to a variety of ICTs, Baldassar examines the case of one such family in an attempt to theorize distance as a factor for consideration, rather than an inevitable barrier to co-presence. Her analysis identifies diverse modalities of virtual co-presence, including *active*, *passive*, *immediate* and *intermediate*, delivered by different types of ICTs that are preferred by different actors in certain contexts. For example, the visuality and materiality of self-presentation and co-presence afforded by Skype is preferred by the elderly and very young, while textual mediums, which facilitate greater agency over the communication exchange, are preferred by the adults. Her re-evaluation of ICTs and family life is inspired by the literature on 'new materialisms', which foregrounds the idea of 'things' as agents (Coole and Frost 2010). She hypothesizes that the communication technologies that comprise polymedia environments are an example of what Bennett calls 'vibrant matter' because the technology itself stands for and represents contact with others by facilitating and even constituting the ability to be there across distance. Of particular relevance to this discussion is Bennett's (2009: xvii)

notion of 'a conception of self … as itself an impure, human—non-human assemblage' – evident in the act of exchanging distant care through the use of technology; in typing the text message or holding the phone to one's ear we become, in both a physical and metaphysical sense, joined with the technology. Baldassar also notes that new technologies, by increasing the sense of co-presence across distance, also increase both the desire for and incidence of visits. At the same time, access to quicker and cheaper travel has increased the opportunity – and thus the pressure of obligation – to visit. Hence, the experience and practice of ICT-based co-presence informs and impacts on that of physical co-presence and vice versa. Baldassar concludes that it does not seem useful to argue about which is more important; but rather to understand their inter-relatedness as the families in her study make use of all the forms of 'staying in touch' across distance that are available to them.

The article by Rachel Brown further extends the analysis of ICT-based co-presence in transnational families and communities through an analysis of its important and multiple roles in the lives of migrant care workers in Israel. She provides compelling evidence of how ICTs are used by these, mostly young, migrants as their primary defence and mode of resistance to, and negotiation of, the precarious employment relationships that leave them easily open to structural, social and institutional discrimination and exploitation. Their constant use of ICTs creates what Brown calls 'a space of affective exchange' that delivers a form of continuous co-presence to offer a liberating coping mechanism and platform for self-expression and resistance within the tightly confined and regimented physical environments of their employer's apartments. Many of the domestic migrants she interviewed were in constant ICT-based contact with distant family and friends, even while they worked, which Brown describes as '*intensive* co-presence', as a way to 'find belonging, express a range of sentiments, and find camaraderie in the sharing of difficult experiences'. Of particular interest in the context of this special issue is Brown's argument about the role of ICTs in not only fortifying her informants' relationships of care and support with family and friends, but also in creating networks of solidarity, community support and activism. One informant described how ICTs provided a sense of 'being-at-home' – a sense that we understand is completely unrelated to his experience of his actual physical abode in his employer's house. Brown argues that the domestic workers' use of ICTs plays a crucial role for creating affective continuity over distance and separation. Here, restrictions on 'physical mobility' and concomitant absence of physical co-presence with loved ones does not hinder the migrants 'virtual mobility' and experiences of distant co-presence; ICTs, she argues, by the new forms of intimacies they enable, 'defy binary notions such as home/away, homeland/diaspora and victim/agent, even as it exists within broader structures of violence that cannot alone be contested through ICT.'

Key themes and future directions

In their refinement of conceptualizations of the notion of 'ICT-based co-presence', the articles in this special issue – as a set – open new avenues to the study of transnational family relationships through the ICTs lens.

Most of the articles draw on Madianou and Miller's notion of polymedia environment as the key concept to examine contemporary migration and media. They point to the need for migration scholars to engage with media studies and studies of new technologies and, thus, heuristically question orthodox conceptualizations of family as a process based on face-to-face routines and interactions. Here the importance of relations to the material world become imperative, in terms of both Baldassar's argument about appreciating the materiality of the technologies and their potentialities as 'vibrant matter', as well as of the importance of access to new technologies as a capability or human right to ensure the wellbeing of migrants and their stay-behind kin and support networks (Merla and Baldassar 2011). However, building on the findings of Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding's (2007) work, most articles report that it is the quality of relationships that influences the impact of polymedia rather than the media in and of itself. So the better the quality of relationships, the more forms of communication are used to sustain it, both face-to-face and virtual.

All the articles examine different modalities and forms of co-presence across distance created by new media and how these forms of distant co-presence interact with and influence proximate forms. They offer a set of new and exciting ways to conceptualize co-presence. Madianou's notion of 'ambient co-presence' encourages us to examine both the positive and negative implications of an 'always on' lifestyle. Nedelcu and Wyss's discussion of 'ordinary co-presence' as ritualized, omnipresent and reinforced invites us to consider distance/separation and ICT-mediated co-presence as two closely intertwined characteristics of the ways of 'doing family' within contemporary family configurations. Robertson, Wilding and Gifford's examination of what they define as 'imaginary co-presence' highlights the creative potentialities and applications of ICTs in the way Karen refugees in Melbourne employ imaginative ways to connect the disconnected. The important role of ICTs for migrants with relatively limited power is also evident in Brown's discussion of 'intensive co-presence' as a constant attentive online presence. Gordano Peile's discussion and comparison of 'hard' and 'soft' co-presence ensures we consider the role of marketing and service providers in creating and reinforcing normative understandings of distant family relationships. Baldassar's discussion of the different types of co-presence afforded by different ICTs and, in particular, her distinction between 'immediate' and 'intermediate' co-presence highlight the importance of analysing the relationship between the context of caregiving, the technologies employed, the access and agency of the people using them and their joint purpose.

At the same time, by focusing on these different types of ICT-based co-presence, the authors in this special issue interrogate the relevance of distance, from de-demonizing it in contexts of high access to polymedia environments among middle classes (Baldassar), to recognizing its potential to transcend and liberate labour migrants located in highly regimented contexts characterized by inequalities (Brown), to contexts where inequities of access to technologies makes distance a very real impediment, as in the case of refugees, and yet new media also offer creative solutions to transcending distance, for example through digital photography (Robertson, Wilding, Gifford).

In sum, this special issue illustrates the point that it is heuristically unfruitful to treat face-to-face/physical and ICT-based forms of communication and co-presence as mutually exclusive or even in competition. Rather, examining the way the two forms of communication interrelate with each other, according to migration regimes, family life course, as well as solidarity norms and cultural obligations, is a more productive approach. Furthermore, the assorted types of ICTs-based co-presence presented by the authors suggest that distance and separation should be considered intrinsically constitutive of family relationships and 'doing family' processes in migration contexts.

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