

# Who is Happy? Who is Not? Cellular-Phone Mediated Communication Among Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

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One hundred thirty seven Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong participated in an investigation into cellular phone use as a medium of communication and as an instrument to levels of happiness. Majority were middle-aged, college graduates, married, Roman Catholic and were into 6-10 years in their current jobs. Through interview and survey, the participants expressed feeling happy owning a cellular phone, which is associated with a certain level of life satisfaction. However, statistical findings showed that this did not significantly relate to their over-all high level of happiness. It was also found that there was a positive relationship between the extent to which calling was able to create relationships and facilitate disclosure of information about oneself and one's happiness. The same was true with texting except between calling and facilitating disclosure about oneself. In both calling and texting, maintaining relationships was negatively related with happiness. Although participants believed that calling and texting could maintain rather than create relationships or aid in the disclosure of information about oneself, it was not found to significantly affect their levels of happiness.

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Face-to-face (FTF) communication is rendered impossible in a situation where women have to work abroad. Thus, women who are mothers, partners, grandmothers, aunts, guardians, or friends find the cellular phone as the greatest invention in the millennium. With it, women as mothers experience immediate relief knowing that their children are safe. As partners, they are able to maintain continued intimacy; as grandmothers and aunts, they are able to constantly communicate with relatives; as guardians, women are able to continue supervision whatever the distance; and as friends, women continue to support each other.

These rewarding experiences with the use of cellular phones

are enhanced when women go abroad to work to send money to their families in the Philippines. Many who have left as caregivers, nurses and domestic workers have expressed how cellular phones, especially with texting, have made communication with their loved ones easier and faster. A text message from a daughter who has just received a medal as an honor student keeps a mother going with more determination in her work to earn more and make her family happy. Phone calls made by loved ones especially on birthdays and other special occasions somehow fill the emptiness and ease the pain of yearning because of the distance from home. Text messages shared with others foster friendships or create such relationships that give them feelings of security that they have for each other. Indeed, cellular phone-mediated communication (CMC) becomes a significant alternative to FTF communication especially among women working abroad. It literally becomes their life-line.

Parreñas (2001) stressed that even with a high level of education, Filipino women migrate because they earn higher wages as domestic workers in postindustrial nations like Hong Kong than as professional employees in the Philippines. Parreñas' research on migrant Filipino domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles showed that they experience emotional dislocation—agonizing for both parents and children. Geographical distance unavoidably engenders emotional distance and strains family relationships. Separation in families of migrant workers instills emotional injuries with which families must cope and somehow overcome in their everyday lives. Distance, without doubt, has painful emotional ramifications both for mothers who leave their children and children who are sent back or left behind (Parreñas, 2001). "The pain of family separation creates various feelings, including helplessness, regret and guilt for mothers, and loneliness, vulnerability and insecurity for children" (p. 116). To some degree, these emotions may dissipate because of what technology—cellular phones, in particular—offer.

Cellular phones have become indispensable gadgets in most people's lives today—in their survival and enhancement—intellectually, socially and even psychologically and spiritually. One does not only see young individuals busy thumbing cellular phone keys to send messages or standing at corners talking on the phone but also find parents checking on their kids, young adults keeping in touch with one another, and professionals doing official business over cellular phone. This is the same scenario one observes in households in the Philippines and all over the world.

The use of cellular phones may offer several benefits such as the thrill and freedom in communicating with loved ones, friends, and even strangers. However, there may be a downside to it. CMC also takes a toll on intimate relationships. Young individuals have related stories about how they develop sexual relationships through the cellular phones, or how they met their boyfriends/girlfriends through texting. Lovers who started out with face-to-face communication use the cellular phone for “cybersex” when distance does not permit them to have physical contact. What they do is write in text what they think and feel, sometimes using symbols. On the other hand, there are those who report feeling harassed by texts (sometimes including graphics and pictures) that are pornographic. They feel helpless because they can not respond right there and then, or that the person sending messages is not recognized by the owner’s phone book. Others also express the number of times they have fought with a loved one, friend, or anyone because of miscommunication in text messages. Technology facilitates easier and faster conduct of people’s lives; however, how one uses the technology is influenced by one’s experiences, needs, inner values and beliefs.

*Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong*

Inspired by the keynote address of Abregana (2003) at the 5<sup>th</sup> biennial conference of the Asian Association of Social Psychology, entitled “From Tseung Kwan O to Kowloon Tong: Exploring Social Psychological Applications in Hong Kong,” I explored the use of technology among Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. Her talk included, among others, her observations of Filipina domestic workers inside mass transit railway rides and on Sundays when they gather together in parks exchanging and reading each other’s text messages.\*

Abregana observed that early in the day, elevators in her housing building are typically busy and the corridor noisy as last minute instructions are given to domestic workers and schoolchildren. Suddenly, the noise is muted as professionals step into the elevators. Abregana observed that the elevator may seem to get cramped but a wide psychological space is maintained as individuals switch into silence, shunning eye contact, and having expressionless faces. This, she also observed in the commuter train that she distinguishes from the LRT/MRT in Manila and the skytrain in Bangkok. In the train in Hong Kong the atmosphere changes on weekends especially on Sundays as groups of Filipino domestic workers board the train and

behave in gleeful abandon. Many are busy sharing text messages, commenting on their get-ups, and selling food items for lunch. Others exchange jokes, filling the train with fun and laughter. These are people who work during the week and are far from their families and loved ones. Abregana said that their salaries have just been lowered owing to a government levy, requiring them to pay HK\$400 monthly ([http://www.geocities.com/press\\_re/press-02-22-2003.htm](http://www.geocities.com/press_re/press-02-22-2003.htm)) and yet, they radiate a sense of humor. In a study done with an undergraduate sample (Lai, 2003, cited in Abregana, 2003) on the relationship between stress and depression, the hierarchical regression model reveals that emotional support and size of close friendship network are significant moderators of the relationship between stress and depression, while sense of humor is not. Nevertheless, the same study shows that the more likely people use humor as a coping strategy in response to stress, the less depressive they are. Based on these observations, Abregana muses, "Who is miserable? Who is happy?"

Filipina domestic workers gather around the central plaza on weekends and engage in CMC. In fact, they use their cellular phones much more frequently than any other person in Hong Kong would, and buy prepaid cellular phone cards more than the typical Hong Kong resident. They show intense joy when talking on the phone and speaking their dialect, and do not care about what other commuters, for example, in the train, think or say. Sharing each other's messages, especially when they meet in the train and in the plaza where they hang out on weekends, seems to be an avenue for them to carry on conversations about family and work.

This study on cellular phone-mediated communication among Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong primarily explored the correlation between their happiness levels and their cellular-phone use. Cellphone-Mediated Communication Interview Schedule and The Oxford Happiness Inventory were used as data-gathering tools. Interviews were done on weekends primarily at the Central Plaza where most of the Filipino domestic workers gathered. Convenience sampling was used. Interviewers approached Filipino domestic workers and interviewed those who were willing to participate in the study.

## RESULTS

From among the Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, 137 willingly became participants. One participant did not provide

information on demographic characteristics. Majority of the 136 participants were between the ages of 30 and 39, married, finished college, and were Roman Catholic. Most of them had been in Hong Kong for 6 to 10 years, had a monthly salary between HK\$ 3,001.00 and HK\$ 3,500.00 and sent 41% to 60% of their salary home for their families' daily expenses and other needs, like construction of houses and other projects in the Philippines or when children have additional school expenses. Majority of them indicated that the money they sent home was enough to cover household expenses but quite a number of them expressed that what they sent home was not enough. Others said the money they sent was sometimes just enough, sometimes lacking, or sometimes more than what their families needed. The rest did not send any amount home. A good number said that the remaining amount was enough to satisfy their personal needs while others claimed that it was not enough.

Participants did housekeeping, laundry and ironing, cooking, childcare, elderly care, carwash, grocery shopping, and budgeting HK\$ 60.00/day, dogcare, and tutoring. Others sold phone cards, did office work, e.g., as sales agent for educational plans, did manicure/cosmetology, and did extra chores employers asked them to do, to earn extra money in addition to their monthly wages.

#### *Relational and working experiences in the use of the cellular phone*

Of the 137 participants, 126 owned a cellular phone, but one lost her phone a few days before the interview. Modes of payment were mostly prepaid while others were postpaid. Majority of the participants earning a minimum wage still managed to own a cellular phone because of the need to communicate with their families. To help them satisfy this need, both Chinese and Filipino entrepreneurs in Hong Kong, particularly those situated at Worldwide Plaza, sell cellular phones on installment. Most of the cellular phones purchased feature only *calling* and *texting* modes. The prepaid mode of payment helps them budget their money, spending an average of HK\$101.00 to HK\$300.00 every month for their cellular phone.

Respondents confirmed that *calling* and *texting* have become so much a part of their lives that they feel uncomfortable without them. A majority of the respondents have been using a cellular phone for five years or more. Their acquisition of a phone was primarily for communication with their families in the Philippines and for convenience in carrying out this communication. Other reasons for

acquiring a cellular phone was “for personal or private use” and not for anything else like for business use, emergency purposes, to maintain their relationships with loved ones in the Philippines, or to help them cope with homesickness. Other reasons reported were “for entertainment,” “required by their employer,” “as medium for long-distance parenting,” and one acquired a cellular phone because it was given by an uncle. The primary use of a cellular phone for communication was “for necessary information regarding money sent for tuition fees of children or other expenses at home.”

*On calling.* The participants used their cellular phones primarily to call family members, and to receive calls mostly from family members and close friends, sometimes from acquaintances, and seldom from others they did not know and from boyfriend/husband. When asked about their feelings (ecstatic, happy, “*ok lang*”, frustrated, angry) regarding their receipt of calls, they expressed varied feelings, mostly “happy” when from family members and close friends rather than feeling “ecstatic” or feeling “*ok lang*” about said calls. The participants said they get “frustrated” when they did not receive calls from family members and close friends. None claimed feeling “angry” when they did not get such calls. Receipt and non-receipt of calls from acquaintances and people the participants did not know elicited an “*ok lang*” feeling from the participants. The participants claim that they feel “happy” when they received calls from their boyfriend/husband and “angry,” “frustrated,” or “*ok lang*” when they did not.

The participants’ close friends were also domestic workers in Hong Kong. Their work days and hours were generally similar to each other, so they met once a week on their days-off and spent the whole day sharing stories, dancing, singing, playing cards and mahjong, and eating. Their work schedule did not allow them to interact with each other through the use of the cellular phone, especially as many employers prohibit them from doing so while at work. If they had a chance to use their cellular phone during work, they made use of it to communicate with family members. Compared to calling their family members “always,” they called their close friends “sometimes” to “often” only.

With acquaintances and people they did not know, participants articulated feeling “*ok lang*” whether or not they receive calls from them. They generally did not call their acquaintances and people they did not know. They did not give much importance to their relationship with acquaintances because this was not of a deep level, more so with people they did not know. There may be an expected feeling of

irritation when one receives calls from a person one does not know. However, their dependence on the cellular phone as the best means for connecting with others made them appreciate any call made to them. One participant said, "*At least merong tawag kesa wala, diba?*" ("At least there is a call from someone rather than no one, right?"). For participants who received calls from their boyfriend or husband, they expressed either feeling "ecstatic" or "happy," which explains their feelings of "anger" and "frustration" when they did not receive any call from the same. Others said that it was "*ok lang*" when he did not call. This might be explained by the fact that they knew an overseas call was expensive. A domestic worker whose boyfriend or husband was also working in Hong Kong found it difficult to understand why he could not call even though Orange Telecommunications did not charge calls made within Hong Kong. Also, calls made between Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia were also charged the lowest rates. This explains the many intimate relationships that developed between Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong and construction workers in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the inability of a boyfriend or husband working in Saudi Arabia to call the wife or girlfriend working in Hong Kong leads to feelings of "anger" and "frustration." Another indicator of this feeling might be the kind of deep-level intimacy they had with their boyfriend or husband, considered basic to their sense of sexuality as women. Not being able to receive calls from a boyfriend or husband made these women feel inadequate as partners. Moreover, they were inhibited to initiate the call because of a norm among women in Filipino culture that regard the act as socially unacceptable. Hence, most participants said they "never" called their boyfriend or husband first. The same was true with text messaging.

*On texting.* Based on a Likert scale (always, often, sometimes, seldom, never), participants said they wished that they received messages "always" from family members, "often" from close friends and "sometimes" from acquaintances. They "always" received text messages from family members, "often" from close friends, "sometimes" from acquaintances, "seldom" from people they did not know and "sometimes" from boyfriend/husband. In their receipt of text messages, Filipina domestic workers expressed that it did not matter to them whether the message is "canned"/forwarded or not as long as they were able to receive text messages from those they wished would communicate with them.

Participants felt "ecstatic" when they received messages from their family members. In instances when they did not receive messages,

they felt usually “frustrated” rather than angry. They also felt “happy” when they received text messages from their close friends but they did not feel “angry” or “frustrated” when they did not receive text messages from their close friends. They reported instead feeling “*ok lang*”. They expressed the same feeling, “*ok lang*” about receipt and non-receipt of text messages from acquaintances and people they did not know. All those who reported receiving and sending messages to their boyfriend/husband expressed feeling “ecstatic” when they received text messages from their boyfriend/husband and “frustrated” when they did not.

As for the type of messages usually sent to them by family members, most were of inspirational-religious and inspirational-relational along with giving/seeking information and advice and humor-political and humor-“green” jokes. Their close friends also sent them inspirational-religious and inspirational-relational type of messages, humor-political and humor-“green” jokes and giving/seeking information and advice. Inspirational-religious and inspirational-relational type of messages, humor-political and humor-“green” jokes, and giving/seeking information and advice were also sent by the participants’ acquaintances. Others not known by the participants mostly sent giving/seeking information type of messages. Some participants’ partners (i.e., boyfriend or husband) sent to them inspirational-relational type of messages, inspirational-religious and humor-“green” jokes type of messages.

Participants with cellular phones reported that they “always” sent text messages to their family members, while they “often” sent text messages to their close friends and *seldom* sent text messages to their acquaintances. They “never” sent text messages to people they did not know and to their boyfriend or husband.

As regards the type of messages participants usually sent to family members, they were usually inspirational-religious and inspirational-relational. Text messages sent to close friends were usually inspirational-religious and inspirational-relational. Participants also mentioned sending to their acquaintances and others they did not know inspirational-religious and inspirational-relational type of messages. For the participants who indicated sending text messages to their boyfriend or husband, they sent inspirational-religious and inspirational-relational type of messages.

Inspirational-religious type of messages was the most common type of messages received and sent. This implied that religion was a very good medium for the Filipina domestic workers to cope with the



hardships of being away from home and the reality of their kind of work. As earlier mentioned, religious activities were always observed during days-off, especially on Sundays, as evidenced by their praying and singing songs of worship in groups. Many of them also carried Bibles and other spiritual books/magazines that they discussed and studied together. This public expression of one's religious conviction in a country of a different faith and culture was indeed a demonstration of the Filipino's deep sense of spirituality.

The second most common type of messages received and sent was inspirational-relational, which might be expected because the primary purpose of owning a cellular phone was to be in constant communication with loved ones. As breadwinners of their families, one of their primary roles was to give/seek information and advice from/to loved ones back home, that was why giving/seeking information and advice type of messages was also commonly received and sent. These were information about the welfare of family members: about money sent home, their family members' condition in the Philippines, and their plight in Hong Kong. As mothers, they gave advice to their children about relationships and especially about school. They also sought emotional support from their close friends especially when they had family problems. In turn, family members and close friends also sought their advice.

#### *Feelings on the use of the cellular phone*

One-half of the cellular phone users expressed feeling "frustrated" when their cellular phone was destroyed (Table 1). Others expressed feelings of being *angry* and "*ok lang*". There was one participant who described feeling *happy* when her cellular phone was lost, while a little more than one-half of them stated feeling *frustrated*, one-fourth expressed feeling *angry* and the rest feeling "*ok lang*."

**Table 1.**

*Feelings evoked when cellular phone is destroyed or lost, N=127.*

Feelings Evoked	Cellular phone is destroyed		Cellular phone is lost	
1 - Angry	36	28%	33	26%
2 - Frustrated	63	50%	70	55%
3 - "Ok lang"	28	22%	23	18%
4 - Happy			1	.79%
5-Ecstatic				
<b>Total</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Advantages and disadvantages.* Filipina domestic workers perceived the cellular phone as advantageous because they were able to communicate with loved ones in the Philippines and it offered fast, easy, and convenient communication with anyone. The phone also gave them comfort especially when they experienced problems, and helped them cope with homesickness. It also helped them during emergency situations, helped them maintain and create relationships, gave them privacy especially in meeting their personal needs, and facilitated their *long-distance* parenting. Others thought it advantageous because they were updated on current events, and used it for business. Some participants reiterated that there were just too many advantages of owning a cellular phone.

A little more than one-half of the cellular phone users deemed owning a cellular phone disadvantageous because it was expensive. A number of the participants felt that it did not have any disadvantages. Some expressed the disadvantage of indiscretion in using the cellular phone in gossiping and nonsense talk, of inconvenience and distraction at work, of feelings of inadequacy in their communication and problem-solving skills and of dependence on it that they felt unsafe and insecure without it. In cases of emergency especially when it involved family members at home, the information received was not sufficient. Other disadvantages of using cellular phones were getting prank calls, being prohibited to use the employer's telephone, receiving bad news quickly, boredom in everyday routine/work/social interaction, and physical discomforts believed to have been caused by radiation.

Thirty-one percent of the Filipina domestic workers preferred to use technology-mediated communication in instances when distance did not allow them face-to-face communication, 22% of them chose not to use face-to-face communication when personal or important topics were discussed and another 22% of them used it when they were in emergency situations. Twenty percent of the participants used their cellular phone when they wanted to play games, calculate, organize schedule of activities, listen to music, and take pictures and when they needed an alarm clock. Sixteen percent of the cellular phone users expressed that they would like to use face-to-face communication in all instances when given the opportunity. The rest (just 2%) used technology-mediated communication in their business transactions and another two percent used it in other work-related activities.

With all the benefits derived from the use of a cellular phone, especially in coping with their work as domestic workers, damaging

or losing it made them feel “frustrated.” They did not actually feel “angry.” Rather, they felt “frustrated” that they could not anymore communicate with their loved ones. The main purpose of having a cellular phone as a communication tool was because of distance from their loved ones and not as a tool to facilitate everything. They expressed that if given a chance, they would still opt for face-to-face communication in all instances. They might have depended on their cellular phones because of distance from home but to them nothing replaces face-to-face communication. The loss or damage of a cellular phone might elicit negative feelings because of the services it provided to the domestic workers prior to loss. However, the participants felt it was not really that significant in their lives.

### CMC AND HAPPINESS

Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI) results show that regardless of factors such as age, educational attainment, civil status, number of children, type of work they did, and their frequency of cellular phone use, Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong are happy. An equal number of Filipina domestic workers reported being happy having a cellular phone while working in Hong Kong.

Correlation statistics showed no relationship between OHI scores and the respondents’ feeling of having a cellular phone in Hong Kong. Filipina domestic workers, as related earlier, primarily purchased cellular phones for use in calling and texting to the Philippines, hence, most of these cellular phones had features only for calling and texting. Having cellular phones allowed them to keep in touch with their families every now and then. Working in Hong Kong was primarily for the welfare of their families and being separated from them resulted in anxiety and loneliness. This is why being updated on the situation of their families in the Philippines gave them certain levels of happiness. Nevertheless, this communication seemed to be just primarily one-way because families in the Philippines could not regularly initiate communication; thus, the non-significance of the relationship. Calling and texting from the Philippines was very expensive, so the happiness of Filipina domestic workers by having a cellular phone was associated more with their being able to contact their families anytime, rather than the other way around.

Positive correlations were found between OHI scores and feelings associated with either receipt or non-receipt of calls from family members, close friends, acquaintances, strangers, and their

boyfriend or husband, and non-receipt of text messages from close friends (Table 2). Decreased levels of happiness were influenced by non-receipt of text messages from family members, acquaintances and others the participants did not know, hence the negative correlations. No correlation was established between OHI and feelings on receipt and non-receipt of text messages from boyfriend or husband. There is an observed significant positive relationship between feelings expressed when calls were not received from family members, close friends, acquaintances, others the participants did not know and their boyfriend or husband, and their happiness levels (OHI). Hence, feelings of “anger” and “frustration” were significantly associated with their OHI ratings. This suggests that “no news is good news” because women who work far from home associate voice calls from family members and friends as emergency or negative (such as someone being sick, more money is needed or that her immediate attention is required). Due to the expense of calling from the Philippines, calling is done only for necessity and not for greetings or social purposes.

**Table 2.**

*Correlation between feelings associated with cellular phones and Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI), N=127.*

<b>Feelings (5-point Scale)</b>	<b>Correlation with OHI</b>	
	<i>When calls are received</i>	<i>When calls are not received</i>
<i>Calls made from:</i>		
Family Members	.31	.89*
Close Friends	.31	.89*
Acquaintances	.35	.89*
Others they did not know	.31	.91*
Boyfriend/Husband	.54	.91*
<i>Text messages sent from:</i>	<i>When texts are received</i>	<i>When texts are not received</i>
Family Members	.07	-.28
Close Friends	.31	.08
Acquaintances	.12	-.11
Others they did not know	.23	-.27
Boyfriend/Husband	—	—

\* significant at .05 level of significance

Among all instances in the receipt and non receipt of either calls and texts that made them express specific kinds of feelings, it was when calls were not received from family members, close friends, acquaintances, others that participants did not know and their boyfriend or husband that significantly affected their levels of happiness. Calls were more personal than text messages. One hears the other's tone of voice, laughing or giggling, sobbing or crying. Because they were far from loved ones, calling was the most personal kind of communication they could make, and not receiving calls could mean a threat to their connection with others, given that receiving calls was a given thing in owning a cellular phone.

Correlation statistics was also used to determine the relationship, and test the significance of the relationship between the perceived influence of the use of a cellular phone to create and maintain relationships and disclose information about oneself, and one's happiness. There appeared to be a positive relationship between the extent towards which calling was able to create relationships and facilitate the disclosure of information about oneself, and one's happiness level. The more frequent calling happened, more relationships were created, more disclosure about oneself was done, and domestic workers were happier. Similarly, an observed positive relationship between texting and the extent to which it creates relationships and happiness levels indicated that the more frequent texting occurred, the more domestic workers were able to create relationships and felt happier. In both calling and texting, maintaining relationships was found to have a negative relationship with happiness levels. No correlation was found to be significant at  $p < .05$ . Although participants believed that calling and texting could maintain relationships rather than create relationships or aid in the disclosure of information about oneself, it was not found to significantly affect their levels of happiness.

## DISCUSSION

A study on Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong was deemed necessary because of their great number in Hong Kong. It may be interesting to know how these women live their lives as domestic workers away from the home country but also discomfoting to realize the difficulties they experience at work, in their families, and why they give up their professional jobs in the Philippines to have better earning abroad. They bring in large revenues to the Philippines,

contributing to the development of the country's economy. Not only do Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong contribute to the development of the Philippine economy but to Hong Kong's economy as well because of the goods they purchase to send home. In spite of this, they do not receive sufficient and appropriate assistance from the government to protect them from any form of abuse or exploitation. They do not get enough care because they do domestic work.

Despite their condition, life for Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong has improved when the cellular phone gained popularity as a communication medium. Almost all Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong own a cellular phone, and, buying phone cards has become part of their practice. It has encouraged telecommunication companies to continually invent technologies to address this increasing use of cellular phone among Filipina domestic workers. One example is the creation of a simcard used for communication only between Hong Kong and the Philippines.

Given the living conditions of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong and the increased use of cellular phone among them, it is asked, "Are Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong happy? Is their use of the cellular phone significantly related to their levels of happiness?"

It amazes anyone to see how Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong have come together in solidarity and joyful disposition during Sundays, always in an atmosphere of gaiety and a festive mood, publicly demonstrating Filipino culture even in a predominantly Chinese environment. It is because of them that the Hong Kong government close the roads in and near the Central Plaza during Sundays so that there would be places for them to stay, spread mats, serve food, play mahjong or cards, give each other manicure/pedicure and haircut, share stories of home and work, and share pictures of family members and houses they have constructed in the Philippines. Their number and their presence are so overwhelming one feels s/he is in the Philippines and not right in the center of Hong Kong. The atmosphere in the buses change drastically during Sundays. Almost every face in the bus is that of a Filipino. Almost every word one hears is Tagalog. They speak in their dialect when with fellow Filipinos from the same region, but they communicate in Tagalog with other Filipinos regardless of whether these Filipinos are domestic workers, tourists, or doing other work. This happens every Sunday in Hong Kong. One sees Filipina domestic workers in their Sunday best with make-up and all, looking every inch like professional workers.

On weekdays, however, they are women wearing work clothes and pants, gloves and rubber boots, carrying *balde*, *tabo* and *trapo* (pail, dipper and washcloth), sometimes with ruffled hair, transformed into domestic workers in the household they serve. They are seen in the terraces of condominium units spreading bed sheets and blankets to dry. They ride in buses to bring children to school. Unlike the buses they take on weekends, these buses are less noisy, even when full of Chinese men and women during peak hours going to and from work. Voices are low, and there is less talking, less laughing, less interaction among passengers, hence the atmosphere is not one of pleasure and delight.

Despite their hardships working as domestics in Hong Kong, these women continue to seek opportunities to somehow keep themselves happy even when they are away from home. Working for a better life for their families, maintaining friendship among themselves, keeping themselves healthy so they can continually work, and feeling better about themselves compared to their peers back home were their principal concerns. On the average, they were able to achieve these, giving them a high level of happiness. Having been able to send their children to school and to provide their family members a better life are their measures of success and rewards for working in Hong Kong. One sees this in the expressions of bliss that are on their faces when they gather on Sundays sharing experiences with each other, and one observes that they really value their friendships. When they see a woman alone at a table in a restaurant where they also hang out, they know right away she is a newcomer. When they see her sad and sobbing, they would approach her and offer her comfort. Many among them say they must keep themselves fit with conscious effort because they could not afford to miss a day's pay, even if most of them have very tiresome jobs. On the other hand, it seems beneficial that they do a lot of walking every day. Also, Chinese food is healthy, so staying fit is not a problem for them. Although they know that their peers back home have professional jobs, they also know that their pay would still not be enough to sustain their families' needs. The kind of life that the Filipina domestic workers are able to provide their families and themselves is far better than what their peers in the Philippines can afford. For them, it is not the prestige of the job one has that can feed the family but the amount of money one earns from the job.

Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong are happy because they find pleasure in the small things they experience, while there

may be pain in a few other things. The pain of separation from the family especially from the children, the heartache caused by the infidelity of a husband, the helplessness felt when a family member is sick, are experiences that somehow make them appreciate the small things. They find pleasure in telling each other how they are able to send their children to finish school even in their absence, or showing each other pictures of an ongoing construction of a house or just being able to laugh all they want on Sundays. These are enough to give them joy. When a group of women was asked how they felt when told that Filipinas are very noisy and they laugh boisterously, they said, "*Wala kaming paki-alam. Basta sa amin, nag-eeenjoy kami masaya kami. Kahit nga ganito lang yung ginagawa namin buong araw ng day-off namin, hindi kami nagsasawa. At pag-uwi namin, dun na namin mararamdaman yung sakit sa mga likod namin sa kakaupo, pero binabalewala namin kasi nagenjoy naman kami ng todo. Ganito lang talaga yung palagi naming ginagawa—tawa ng tawa!*" ("We don't care about what people say. To us, this is fun and we are enjoying it. That's why even if this is the only thing we do on our day-off, we do not get bored. Although we feel pain in our backs from continuous sitting, we don't mind it because we are enjoying. This is how we feel and what we do always—we just laugh all the way"). Because of perceptions among Hong Kong locals of them being noisy or loud (in buses, translations about observing silence is done only in Tagalog presuming that anyone who is noisy is a Filipina), of the maltreatment they get from employers, of inadequate support for them from both Hong Kong and Philippine governments, these women do what they want to do and need to do. They choose to be happy.

Their experiences with each other are valuable to them. They contribute to a more satisfied life, to being happy. The Objective List Theory mentions goods that are important and long-lasting. Happiness is not just about feelings. Moreover, this study shows that one's happiness may be more complex than mere ownership of a material thing such as a cellular phone. The Filipina domestic workers in this study reported feeling happy owning a cellular phone in Hong Kong, but this did not count as a valuable item to them. It is merely a medium of communication, and nothing more. There is nothing in the cellular phone that is more important than its use because it will always be an impersonal medium for contact with family and friends. Happiness comes not with how one feels but with what one gets out of life. What one gets must be commensurate with what one initially aspired for. Filipina domestic workers have attained what has been aspired for—



primarily being able to give their families better lives. Despite hardships at work, they are able to adjust and adapt to life changes in Hong Kong even though being away from home has caused feelings of pain and loneliness. With these experiences, their sense of well-being is enhanced through their relationships with others especially the friendships they forge with each other as seen in the way they interact on weekends. Consequently, these allowed them to experience high levels of happiness.

Generally, one thinks that the cellular phone gives a person happiness at being able to communicate with loved ones especially in instances when one is away from them. The cellular phone may have allowed Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong to connect with loved ones but the use of it is not a source of their happiness. Cellular phones are simply goods that may give pleasure to a certain degree but never entirely contribute to the over-all happiness of an individual. The cellular phone is not considered by Filipina domestic workers as one of the essential reasons of their decision to work in Hong Kong. It is a medium to stay in contact but not that improves their economic status better. In fact, it takes a toll on their income because its use requires money. Similarly, most of them purchase only those cellular phone models that can send/receive calls and texts primarily, because sending and receiving multimedia messages is costly. Only a few Filipina domestic workers own cellular phones with multimedia features. Happiness or misery among Filipina domestic workers is never tied to the use of cellular phones or the features that they have. It is always about fulfilling the needs of their family, especially their children, which had been their primary goal at choosing to work in Hong Kong, away from home.

With the vast number of Filipina domestic workers purchasing cellular phones and prepaid cards to communicate with their loved ones, Hong Kong established a special telecommunication network primarily only between Hong Kong and the Philippines. Orange offers the cheapest rate of calling the Philippines. To encourage the purchase of this particular sim card, Orange offers free calls within the Hong Kong area. This telecommunication group is not threatened by loss with these free calls among Hong Kong residents because as observed there is an assurance that almost all Filipina domestic workers call home regularly, hence, there is a regular purchase of cellular phone prepaid cards. Nevertheless, it still means spending. Most of them expressed spending a lot of money on prepaid cards and this they consider as loss in terms of the additional money they could send

home. However, they know it is a necessity to call home to update themselves on the situation of their families. The use of a cellular phone becomes more of a necessity to communicate as they feel obligated to do it; however, merely owning one is not an indicator of their happiness.

A lot of questions have been raised with regard to technological progress. Is it good or bad? One of the earliest feminist psychoanalysts, Karen Horney, spoke of a world of continuous technological and cultural change, concluding that in effect one can not help but become neurotic. People's lives constantly change, too. They make do with what they have and what they do not have, they seek. Migration for whatever reason has evolved to merit the term *diaspora*.

It is ironic that women have long been relegated a subordinate position in most societies and yet it is woman's work—that is, domestic work—that has fairly recently kept the Philippine economy afloat. A mother and most every other woman consider domestic work a thankless job. "A woman's work is never done," so goes the saying, perhaps not coming from a man. Even paid domestic work is given lesser importance. But, as exemplified in most domestic workers' narratives, it is not really a matter of choice between the material and the psychological or between food-shelter-education and the pain of separation and loneliness. It might even be ridiculous to actually consider weighing the situation at all. The end justifies the means.

The attitude, the endurance, the aspiration, the dream—all touching a deep and personal level. Happiness and overall satisfaction with life may give one a feeling of hope about the welfare of the woman domestic worker, but one also knows so much sacrifice lies beneath. Perhaps it is in this recognition that one can truly acknowledge the woman's worth.

## NOTES

\* Based on the 1999 census of the National Statistics Office, it was revealed that among the 231,000 overseas domestic workers, 104,000 were employed in Hong Kong and the rest are distributed in Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Taiwan, USA and Japan.

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