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DEBATE

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DEBATE

Digital Kinship: The Future Calling

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“Does he care about you?”

“Ofcoure! He calls me everyday!”

There is a general sense of agreement that the concept of care is a slippery idea and can incorporate multiple meanings and practices within its ambit. Scholars have also highlighted the practical difficulty associated with identifying which activities constitute care in comparison to others (Mol, Moser, and Pols 2010). Broadly, there is a consensus that empirical categories constituting care include activities like cooking, cleaning, shopping, building, nursing, childcare, therapy and maintaining relationships, feeling concerned and so on (England and Folbre 1999; Hughes 2002). Taking into account the technologically mediated experiences of transnational aging, should we include calling, texting, facetimeing, and online ordering in this list now? Furthermore, care can occur across multiple sites: families, households, neighborhoods, schools, offices, nursing homes, hospitals, and community homes, which can be clubbed under the broader categories of public and private spaces. But with the rise of transnational care realities, should we also include mobile phones, laptops, pads and other virtual sites in this list now? Consider, for example, the quote at the beginning of this text. When discussing transnational care with my 62 year old male respondent Deepjot, who was living in Delhi, India, he promptly stated that his son, who had moved to Canada with their daughter-in-law, was providing care to him through daily phone calls. According to Joan Tronto (1993, 40), care includes any and all activities that help to “maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible.” With many of these care activities and sites being digitally possible, I question whether this has changed our ways of providing and receiving care in ways that challenge our understanding of care, kinship, and the life course.

I posed these questions in my doctoral ethnographic fieldwork, where I interviewed members of 25 Indian transnational families consisting of globally migrated adult children and their aging parents living alone or with spouses in India. The findings of and experiences shared during that research have prompted me to respond positively to such questions of digital care. In this debate piece, I thus argue in favor of Strathern’s statement that “Technological innovation invites us to think innovatively about how persons are born and the relatives to whom they are born. Yet instead of the potential, the creation of unique individuals and unplanned effects, the future seems increasingly trapped by present choice. It is as though creativity were trapped by artifice” (1995, 434).

Technological innovations in the field of care circulation within families invite us to incorporate new methods, new sites, and new understandings of care in our mundane and analytical repertoires. Digital technologies have become potent strategies of providing and receiving care by fostering interconnectivity and sustaining “co-presence” (Baldassar et al. 2016, 251). Their role in shaping the futures of aging, care, and kinship becomes even more relevant when we look at the flow of care being

maintained across long distances. Existing literature (Ahlin 2017; 2020; George 2005; Wilding and Baldassar 2018) also shows that transnational caregiving differs from caring while living together in a significant way. While living together may create multiple possibilities for caring in terms of hands-on provision of physical care, in transnational caring, this aspect of caring is largely absent due to vast distances.

In this context, this debate text tries to understand how intergenerational care practices within Indian transnational families have been driven by technological advances. On the one hand increased life longevity and decreasing fertility rates are resulting in a rising proportion of aging populations (Office of the Registrar General 2011; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2020; Panigrahi 2009). On the other hand, in the era of post-liberalization and globalization of the Indian economy (post 1991), transnational migration for work has seen a phenomenal rise (Ugargol et al. 2016; Visaria 2001). Indian society is marked by rapid urbanization and employment-related migration, both skilled and unskilled, of young people to bigger Indian cities and internationally (Bailey, Hallad, and James 2018; Deshingkar and Akter 2009). Due to these increasing intranational and international migratory flows, the family residential structures are getting altered, and many of the older persons are increasingly living alone or with aged partners (Maity, Sinha, and Nag 2022).

In a country where elderly care was largely embedded in the patriarchal joint family (Jadhav et al. 2013), these developments are complicating family-based care arrangements for older adults. As in many Asian countries (and unlike the West), in India, co-resident family units have traditionally served as the prime source of caregiving for older and younger family members (Lamb 2009; Mishra and Kaur 2021; Samanta 2019). However, under the shifting mobility of adult children, as outlined above, these family-based care arrangements (from migrating children to older persons and vice-versa) are increasingly being disrupted. This raises questions around the continuity of family-based care and about the role of technology in crafting desirable aging futures. For most of my respondents, care usually gets manifested in the migrant person's micromanagement of the day-to-day needs of their aging parents staying back in India. The process includes the flow of remittances and gifts (Aneesh 2000; Faini 2007); periodic visits (Bailey, Hallad, and James 2018); being available over phone/internet for those who stay put (Pols 2012) or as anthropologist Tanja Ahlin (2020, 69) puts it "frequent calling as care." These materially and immaterially facilitated bonds function as care-at-a-distance (Singh, Robertson, and Cabraal 2012).

Role of Information Communication Technologies in Transnational Care-circulation

There is growing recognition that Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are becoming a key entity in maintaining kinship relationships, especially in the care-circulation process (Ahlin and Li 2019; Baldassar et al. 2016; van der Horst, Shadymanova, and Sato 2019; Madianou and Miller 2012; Nedelcu 2012; Wilding 2006) through co-creating intergenerational virtual spaces (Ahlin and Li 2019). Scholars working on migration and transnationalism have hailed ICTs as the "social glue of transnationalism" that "enabled death of distance" (Vertovec 2004, 219-220). They have been dubbed as "technologies of care" (Wilding 2006, 391) as they generate new possibilities for caring (Hromadžić and Palmberger 2018), providing advice, sharing stories, and sustaining cultural identities (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016) and expressing emotions across distances. Combined, ICTs are the ways of making and maintaining kinship relationships.

Following my doctoral ethnographic field data, where I interviewed members of 25 Indian transnational families consisting of globally migrated adult children and their aging parents living alone or with spouses in India, I investigated their perspectives on how technology transforms the nature of

intergenerational ties within their families. Empirical evidence from my field observations and interviews with older adults and migrated adult children shows that the majority of transnational Indian families see technology as indispensable in shortening geographical distances and holding together family members across borders. While using technology as a way of providing and receiving care, it offers great possibilities for the future of transnational care arrangements but it also limits the human quotient in the process. Conversations with my respondents demonstrated that technology is shaping and reshaping the future of kinship relations in and out. This makes me think and rethink Strathern's statement and I find myself standing in favor of it again and again.

The older adults interviewed in my doctoral research expressed their profound appreciation for how convenient and effective ICTs are when it comes to communicating with children living abroad. The onset of digital platforms has brought about a radical shift on how older people relate to their extended family by enabling them to bridge physical gaps and allowing them to become more actively involved in their loved ones' lives. One of my respondents, a 65 year old female, finds it so easy to connect with her grandchild almost every day on WhatsApp video call. She expresses her joy for being able to see her migrated kin despite the distance, which gives her a feeling of living together. Older adults can share experiences, give advice through video calls, messaging apps or social media platforms, which keep them close to their migrated adult children despite distance between them. ICTs play a pivotal role in bridging the gap across borders by enhancing connectivity, fostering emotional support within kin and creating and maintaining a deep sense of belonging within these families. My respondents have also used ICTs to alter the dynamics of the intergenerational care circulation, enabling older adults and distant adult children to maintain care relationships despite the physical distance. They found ICTs generating new possibilities of caring, providing advice, sharing stories, sustaining cultural identities, and expressing emotions across distances; in short, ICTs co-create intergenerational virtual spaces (Ahlin and Li 2019).

Digital Kinship Practices

Several scholars have examined ways of doing family across borders (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016; Sarkisian 2006). They have mainly focused on ways of maintaining family and intimate relations across transnational spaces through practices of transnational caregiving to aging parents (Ahlin 2017; 2020; George 2005; Wilding and Baldassar 2018), practices of caring for young children through transnational mothering (Cabalquinto 2020; Madianou 2012; Parreñas 2001; Platt et al. 2016), and transnational grandparenting (Nedelcu and Wyss 2019; Parreñas 2005). The central idea behind this emerging field of study is the recognition that the ideational concept of family and kin relations is maintained by choice and negotiated across time and space rather than determined by nation-state borders (Baldassar 2007; 2011).

Many of the authors cited throughout this paper have followed the material-semiotic approach, which emphasizes the agency of material entities like technologies within social relations (Ahlin 2020; Horst and Miller 2012; Mol 2002; Pols 2012). For kinship arrangements where technology plays a significant role, I coined the term 'digital kinship.' I use it to describe the process of maintaining kinship relations (transnationally, in the case of my research) with the help of digital technologies. Digital kinship provides an opportunity for older adults and their migrated kin to create and live in co-presence.

I relate to how Strathern stresses that social innovation can be facilitated by technology, which becomes very evident in my field data. Technological advances have revolutionized how essential kinship practices are carried out in transnational families and have changed kinship imaginaries. There has been an increase in virtual celebrations on special occasions over the years within the context of digital family

relationships. Special occasions like birthdays, anniversaries, and festivals are now celebrated online, with family members connecting through video calls. These virtual gatherings allow “doing family” (Kaur and Shruti 2016, 74), regardless of where the different members live. Not only do these virtual gatherings allow family members to overcome geographical barriers, but they also create a strong sense of community and closeness. By taking part in these important family traditions through virtual means, these transnational family members strengthen their bonds and maintain their shared identity. Sending digital gifts has become a significant method for family members living far apart to convey love and care. Digital gifts, such as e-cards and online purchases, provide an easy and individualized way to show appreciation and commemorate special occasions. Exchanging digital gifts not only fosters emotional connections but also serves as a concrete representation of attention and consideration within digital family relationships.

In a country where elderly care was largely embedded in the patriarchal joint family (Jadhav et al. 2013) and state-sponsored care facilities are negligible, developments such as rising migration and the increase in the aging population, are complicating family-based care arrangements for elderly. To fill this vacuum, several market-driven mechanisms of elderly care ranging from Antara, Age Venture India, Avaza, Emoha, Epoch, Elcare, Goodfellows, etc. have sprung up in India promising to offer family-like care or home care facilitated by technological advancements. These advancements include 24/7 surveillance for older persons who are living alone as their children have migrated globally; regular updates of the aging family member provided over WhatsApp groups with photos and videos; gigified platforms for nursing services; quick online transactions to provide financial care including remittances, gifts, delivery of daily care products and medicines; bookings for medical treatments etc.

My interviews with migrated adult children and their aging parents in India have indicated that technology has not only helped migrated children to look after their aging parents but also aided the older persons to find new experiences of aging that are different from being passive receivers of care and the traditional lethargic stereotypes of aging. Now with the help of technology older adults are finding new connections with like-minded people in their age groups. For example, social media brings them new ways for living their life to the fullest in their second innings, and learning new technologies gives them confidence to keep a good pace with the present world and with new generations, especially with their grandchildren.

However, an affirmation of the possibilities of digitally mediated care circulation for renewed and new modes of kinship, does not mean that it is without limitations. Another respondent, a 33 year old unmarried man working as an IT professional abroad and well connected to his parents living in India, points to the ambiguity of digital kinship. He reflects that sometimes digital kinship practices feel like a boon to have our own life on our terms with the satisfaction of fulfilling our duties from distances. At other times, however, when we need the physical proximity of kin, these digital connections are not satisfactory. On the one hand, digital kinship offers new ways of providing and receiving care, like booking medical appointments and services at home, regular surveillance, remittances, etc. But, on the other hand, it also lacks a sense of physical intimacy and the *feeling* of being loved and cared for by 'touch', 'smell', or 'warmth.'

Conclusion

This paper highlights the significant impact of ICTs on how transnational Indian families provide intergenerational care across borders and maintain their kinship connections. Based on fieldwork and data analysis, the paper shows that technology plays a crucial role in maintaining connections, offering emotional support, and preserving familial bonds across geographical boundaries. Supporting

Strathern's statement, this paper emphasizes the potential of technological advancements to change the ways and patterns of aging and care, yet also acknowledges the unplanned effects of our present choices on future kinship networks that rely more on technology and less on physical proximity and human care. The paper combines real-life examples with theoretical frameworks to provide a nuanced view of how technology affects kinship dynamics, presenting new opportunities and new practices of 'doing family,' or should I call it 'digital kinship', as the future unfolds...

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