THE YOUNG FILIPINO MIGRANTS WORKING IN SALES IN DUBAI:
DOES CULTURAL CAPITAL HELP?

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Since the 1970s, rapid economic development in the oil-producing countries of the Gulf—due to the utilization of huge export earnings from petroleum products that were transferred into infrastructure and city development—has led to a sudden and great demand for labor—mainly in the construction and service sectors. In the first phase of this neoliberal development, manifested by urbanization (Pacione, 2005), migrant workers from other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Yemen, Jordan and Palestine, were employed in these growing economies. Since the beginning, particularly in the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar, migrant workers have comprised more than half of the total population (Halliday, 1984: 6).

From the late 1980s onwards, the ratio of Arab to Asian guest workers decreased sharply. As Pearson (2009: 21) argues, referring to Weiner (1982: 12), this can be related to the close cultural ties and assumed kinship obligations between local and foreign Arabs, which began to affect the political stability of the Gulf States. By the 1990s, the total number of workers from Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Philippines accounted for 85 percent of the total immigrant workforce (Zachariah et al, 2004, 2229). Another reason for the change in migratory trends and migration policy was the completion of major infrastructural projects and the economic recession, which reduced demand for unskilled and semi-skilled laborers during this period. The current employment structure is characterized by the large presence of employees in tertiary activities, such as trade, restaurants and hotels, transport, communications, finance, real estate, personal services and government services (Zachariah et al, 2004, 2228). The UAE also reflects this general migratory trend, with the increasing importance of the tourism, real estate and service sectors in its economy, leading cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi to be classified as global sites. According to Benton-Short et al. (2005: 952), Dubai ranks first among similar cities in terms of the rate of remittances and percentage of the immigrant
population. There has been increasing heterogeneity among guest workers along educational, socio-economic and ethnic lines. However, with their high cultural capital (hereto forth defined as college/university education and competency in English), young, educated immigrants from the Philippines, who constitute the subject matter of this article, seem to be the most needed migrant group in sales and other service-related jobs.  

There is a growing literature on migrant lives in Dubai, particularly regarding the sharp class distinctions and radical differences in lifestyles of expatriates from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Considering UAE migration policy, socio-economic inequalities and spatial restrictions, the literature refers to certain broad and essential categories in classifying migrants in Dubai (see Davis, 2006; Malecki and Ewers, 2007; Masad, 2008; Syed Ali, 2012). According to this general classification, the first expatriate group is constituted by professional Western, Arab and Asian migrants, who are highly paid and well integrated into the consumer space of the city. However, like all other expatriates, they are excluded from any possibility of gaining permanent citizen status in the UAE. The second group is composed of skilled or semi-skilled workers, who are mostly represented in technical, service-related and sales jobs. They are young, generally well educated and work in a luxurious consumer environment. Young Filipino migrants in Dubai are most represented in this category, which is also the least studied in the literature. The third group comprises unskilled workers, including construction workers from countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and domestic workers from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and many other countries. Considering their severe socio-economic suffering and socio-spatial isolation, this third group is often discussed in the literature on the UAE and its migration policies. Members of this migrant category are clearly isolated from the city space, as domestic workers are generally restricted to their domestic space while construction workers reside in labor camps. The literature on the UAE and/or Dubai deal with the conditions of these unskilled workers (see Davis, 2006; Malecki and Ewers, 2007; Masad, 2008; Pearson, 2009; Syed Ali, 2012) from a very general perspective while, due to restrictions imposed on researchers, in-depth studies of construction and domestic workers are almost non-existent.

There is also an almost complete lack of in-depth research on the second migrant group, in which Filipino migrants are densely represented. Members of this group are generally well-educated (mostly college graduates), and come into daily contact with the city’s inhabitants who come from various countries and socio-economic backgrounds through the course of their work in the city’s most luxurious spaces, as mentioned above. “Does this physical ‘being there’ and sociability lead to sound integration into the city life for these migrants?” was the main question in my mind that initiated the research process. Preliminary talks with the migrants gave rise to various other questions: How do they perceive living in Dubai? Do they feel integrated socio-spatially? What kind of problems do they experience? How do they relate to their home country? Young Filipino sales workers in Dubai’s up-market shopping malls (Dubai Mall, Mall of the Emirates, and Mirdiff City Center) therefore constitute the subject matter of this study. A period of pilot research also showed that Filipino migrants working in sales cannot be taken as a homogenous category, being rather crosscut by differences in cultural and social capital. My research therefore developed along three lines of questioning:

• the general socio-economic conditions of these young migrants

• the way these young people connect and relate themselves to the city space
• to what extent lead intra-communal differences (in terms of family background, socio-economic conditions, marital status, age, as some parameters that cross-cut common aspects of their cultural capital) to divergence in their perceptions of Dubai, and their place and life in the city.

Thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with young Filipino migrants between the ages of 20 and 30. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. The interviews generally took place in their work places, so less busy working hours were selected for interviewing. In order to protect the identity of project participants, I use pseudonyms in place of their names in this article. To investigate the first research question, I ascertained the informants’ migration history, working conditions, consumption style and socio-economic linkages with their home countries. For the second research question, I asked about their spaces of consumption, their residential space, and their perceptions and knowledge of the city. While I suspected that working and residing in the midst of Dubai’s most affluent areas might cause feelings of alienation in these young people, it might also lead to possibilities of better integration into the city spaces. Through the interviews I also sought to determine intra-communal differences and investigate how these differences affect informants’ responses.

Common Challenges Filipinos Working in Sales Face in the Workplace

Filipino workers in the UAE (aside from domestic workers) share various common aspirations and life styles despite their intra-communal differences. In her analysis of the “kababayan street community”, Hosoda (2013: 26) finds commonalities such as “most Filipinos live in bed spaces, either alone or with several family members, relatives, or close friends, and they try to make the most of their luck in having entered the UAE by learning how best to survive in the new and changing environment, constantly searching for better-paid jobs, taking part-time jobs, and minimizing living costs”. This observation is also reflected in the shared aspirations and lifestyles of my respondents in Dubai. Despite the fact that Filipino migrants working in sales constitute the upper tier of “ordinary workers” in terms of their university/college education accompanied by language and communication skills, they all experience common challenges and use similar strategies to endure hardships in Dubai. One of the most important common challenges facing my respondents is to work in jobs which do not reflect their education level and skills.

Accepting a job that is considerably inferior to one’s education level is defined by Kahalaf and Alkobaisi (1999: 291) in their studies on migrants in UAE as a strategy of “downgrading in types of jobs”. As they point out, “such jobs are often not in harmony with [the workers’] professional perception of themselves and their original career plans”, but they need to continue with these jobs in order to find themselves a place in the host country (Khalaf and Alkobaisi, 1999: 291). At first glance this seems likely to be true for young Filipino migrants. However, after listening to their stories of migration, the motivations behind it and the lack of suitable jobs available in the Philippines that are in accordance with their education levels, it becomes evident that downgrading starts not in Dubai, but in the Philippines. That is, the jobs that are on offer in the Philippines are largely either in sales or supervising in sales, which are similar to the type of jobs offered to these workers in the UAE. The following comment by my respondent Ariel is typical in this respect:
A: I finished the Management I am not sure if you are familiar with... in the university... But I finished the college, Management College...

M: So like call center job what other kinds of job you can find in Philippines with such a degree?

A: Mostly office work, I am not quite sure what the other type of work, mostly it would be like under... Most of my bachelors were like managers in fast food chains like KFC... What else, some were, some joined the banking industry. Others... Not quite sure of the others... But a lot of them also entered the call center business, but I am not sure what their levels are now.

In that sense, the recognition or the non-recognition of migrants’ cultural capital at home or in the host country is a crucial factor in determining the opportunities of the migrants on a global scale. Erel (2010) discusses the role of “cultural capital” in international migrants’ lives, both in their home and host countries. He criticizes the way the concept “cultural capital” is used in migration studies in their neglect of intra-communal differences within migrant communities and differing abilities of individual migrants to strategically convert and use their capital in diverse ways. It also emerged as an important factor in my research that some migrants, due to certain differences in their family background, marital status, gender and class status, occupy different power-positions, which affects their ability to make use of their cultural capital strategically or in a more flexible way. From the narratives of my respondents, it is possible to claim that their institutional cultural capital (namely, their university education) is validated neither internationally nor nationally.

Despite this international and national non-recognition, some migrants who feel fewer obligations to their families are able to exercise more flexibility in changing jobs, either in Dubai, at home in the Philippines or anywhere else in the world. As such, they are more upwardly mobile. A living example of a vulnerable migrant position is Hazel, who suffers from ill-treatment at the hands of her bosses and in her inability to take any days off. She came to Dubai because her options in the Philippines were also restricted, and she earns more here than back home. However, the needy situation of her family leaves her without options in Dubai. Despite being ill treated, she does not have any plans to change jobs or look for other options because she is not in a position to take the risk that may emerge by changing jobs.

H: I graduated computer science.

M: If you want to stay in Philippines and you want to find a job there, what kind of job can you find?

H: In computer related also mam because my work before was in outsourcing. In computer related.

M: So you work before?

H: Yeaa I worked before in Philippines. Outsourcing company.

M: Why do you choose to come here?

H: Becauseee, aaaa, my family also wanted me to work abroad. More high salary, nice salary.
Because in Philippines right now, not good salary not enough for the everyday expenses, my brothers going also to the college so not enough... Therefore I’d like to come to Dubai also.

There are many reasons for the non-recognition of the institutional cultural capital of my respondents: structural factors, such as the UAE’s migration regime, the Philippine’s emigration policy, ethnic labor divisions in the UAE, stereotyping of Filipino identity, and private factors, such as education, family background, gender and social class.

With particular regards to the issue of a mismatch between their jobs in Dubai and their educational levels, the respondents often point to Dubai’s ethnic division of labor and the injustices that arise as a result. They frequently mentioned that their qualities were not assessed objectively by their bosses due to the ethnic division of labor in Dubai. Simone Christ (2012: 683) made a similar comment when referring to Filipinos working in Dubai. According to him, though Filipinos get higher salaries than other nationalities like Sri Lankans (because Filipinos are associated with certain favorable characteristics like “sociable manners” and fluency in English) they receive a lower salary than their Arab colleagues for the same work, even in cases where an Arab colleague has less formal education. Despite the fact that Filipinos benefit from the ethnic hierarchy within the low-wage sector to some extent, their formal college education is of no benefit to them, which is often a source of frustration when compared with their Arab colleagues (Christ, 2012: 683). Most of my respondents noted how their Arab colleagues were always better paid despite having lower educational qualifications and poorer spoken and written English. The following is a typical expression of this frustration as voiced by Gina:

This is always my problem here. And secondly when you are Filipino, you will be lower. In fact you are doing more job than them. Like in an office, he is receiving higher than yours [referring to the salaries]. Triple than your salary. But they cannot even type English and they will be adding more works on you [referring to Arab colleagues]. Plus you have boss, right? Your boss will already give you task. Thus this one because he cannot handle his job, he will add more works to you. You cannot say no. Because he is acting also like a boss and you cannot do anything. So I don’t know/understand why it is like this here.

Particularly in the UAE, where ethnic identities are a critical factor in state migration policies, the images associated with different ethnicities clearly define hierarchies in the job market (see also Christ, 2012: 683). In this hierarchy, Arab workers in sales are generally treated better and they are generally in supervisory conditions. In cases where Filipinos have Filipino colleagues in the workplace, this hierarchy does not constitute an immediate concern.

“Friendly, Easy-going and Caring”: the Stereotypes Associated with Filipinos

The ethnic division of labor in Dubai, or in the global labor market more generally, cannot be considered separate from the immigration policies and strategies of countries whose export of migrants forms a major part of their economic revenue. The stereotypical images associated with Filipino migrants that make them desirable in the service sector mostly relate to and are strengthened by the migration policy of the sending country and the demands of the global labor market. As Erel (2010) and Christ (2012) note, the images of Asian migrants as “friendly”, “easy going”, “caring”, and “helpful” not only create certain opportunities but also restrict these migrants’ options. Referring to the case of Filipinos in Canada, Erel (2010: 649) found that, due
to these simultaneously enabling and limiting identifications, Filipinos are mainly employed in health and childcare. In his study on the internet sites of migration agencies, Tyner (2009) detected overtly racist claims, particularly with regards to the “marketing” act of domestic workers (2009: 130). Agencies present migrant workers as commodities, offering “worker-replacement” guarantees if the performance of the work in question is perceived to be unsatisfactory, while some recruitment agencies offer guarantees and replacement deals. Many prospective domestic workers for example, are described as “willing to do all” and “pleasant” (Tyner, 2009: 124). As Christ (2012: 683) notes, workers from Asia are, in general, described as having particular characteristics, such as efficiency, obedience and being easier to control. “In the case of Filipinos, these essentialized perceptions of culture and ethnicity determine the job opportunities of Filipino migrants. In this way, recruitment firms participate not only in the global distribution of material “products” (i.e. migrant workers) but also in the production and circulation of particular “images” or “representations” (Tyner, 2009: 128).

Though these explicitly racist claims are mostly related to the global marketing of domestic workers, as gathered from the narratives of my respondents (positioned on the upper rank of the low-wage sector), these “pleasant” attitudes, which are mostly considered as part of their culture, are not only a befitting description of their relationships with the customers, but also in their relationships with their bosses and colleagues of other ethnicities. In encountering Filipino migrants during my in-depth interviews, most of these young people reflect attitudes very much in accordance with the “pleasant” stereotypical images associated with them. This makes it very difficult as a researcher to determine to what extent these common attitudes reflect actual cultural qualities of Filipino migrants rather than a desired image that they strive to present, particularly in the workplace. Despite this concern, it is possible to argue that there was a general state of “optimism” among most of my Filipino respondents despite the very difficult conditions that some were facing in Dubai, such as crowded housing, long working hours and family obligations. This attitude can be best described as a general acceptance of faith and life as it is. In their narratives, they avoided harbouring a sense of hopelessness. Instead, their remarks were filled with optimism, positive expectations and possibilities about the future.

Tyner (2009:143-44), in his analysis of Filipino online networks, refers to this state of existence by means of a Filipino word: mabuhay, that is often used as a greeting. This word is translated as “May you have life”, and is assumed to be the equivalent to the English word “greetings”. However, within the Philippine culture, mabuhay evokes more than a simple greeting—it captures the concept of being alive, and of a collective enjoyment (Tyner, 2009: 143-44). This is not a place-bound enjoyment of life but something more universal, an attitude that I observed in many cases throughout the period of research. Despite the common challenges that they face in Dubai, for most Filipinos, Dubai can be considered as an opportunity in many respects, providing inter-ethnic possibilities for communication and networking, better consumption possibilities, while simultaneously offering a more restricted migrant life that “disciplines” them and helps them to save. They mostly consider Dubai a place to “work only” and “save money”. The following comments by Ariel, who comes from a relatively privileged family background and mentioned that he had grown up quite spoiled, is quite representative in pointing out how some migrants take living in Dubai as a disciplining experience:

*That is my main purpose, if I am not going to be saving any money I might as well return to my old job in the Philippines. I am saving. It is a little difficult. I mean, to be quite honest as well,*
my salary here compared to what I am receiving back in the Philippines is almost the same. Like converted dirhams to peso, Filipino money. But life style, it is different, it is different. I get to save a lot of money here, may be you are thinking the reason of your staying out of the Philippines is to save money. Here you really worked for it, I don’t even have a nanny to cook food for me so I take care of everything by myself. It is really different back in the Philippines. I had time to relax bought a lot of stuff just to satisfy my wants [he is referring to his life in Philippines]. Here it is gonna be all budgeted. So first thing would be house, bed space, I cannot afford a house. It is only a bed space.

It is very important to consider how intra-communal differences regarding cultural capital define the diverse ways this “light” feeling mentioned above is experienced and expressed or how this general “optimism” helps to overcome the frustrations in Dubai mainly with reference to the narratives of the migrants who have relatively less financial and social assets. Depending on the degree of obligations that the workers carry, this “optimistic” approach and how it has been utilized may vary from one case to another. For example, one of my respondents, Edwin, a young man who is 28 and has been working in Dubai for four years, refers to Dubai as being a pleasant experience. His parents work in the Philippines as senior public servants, meaning he does not need to send money back home every month. This puts him in a relatively comfortable position when compared to other migrants. He perceives his life in Dubai as mainly an opportunity to meet new people and develop networks. His optimism about his life in Dubai is expressed as follows:

M: So how do you define to be a Filipino in Dubai?

E: I think happy-go-lucky. For me I am a person who wishes, go with the flow. I am a kind of person that goes with the flow. Something like that, so generally people in Dubai, Filipino in Dubai, I think they are happy. They are happy working here.

Analy’s optimism, on the other hand, helps her to stay strong against the challenges in her life. She came to Dubai mainly to escape her unhappy marriage and she carries a heavy financial burden and responsibility towards her family and children back in the Philippines. Even for such vulnerable migrant Filipino communities, Dubai is simultaneously considered to be a place to be free, to earn money and to consume more luxurious and varied items more cheaply as compared to the Philippines:

M: What do you think about this city?

A: For me Dubai is like, what you call this one? We have a dessert special sweet in Philippines, we call this Halo-Halo, with a lot of ingredients, Dubai here you can find everything, everything and anything in any way, and you can do that.

M: So this is how you are feeling about Dubai? I mean, like this sweet that you can find everything, as you can do whatever you want?

A: Yaa [with a kind of hesitancy]. Because it is like, because it is always, like it is a lot of choice, if that thing will be sweet for you if you take it sweet; it will be bitter if you take it bitter.

The last sentence of her comment: “that thing will be sweet for you if you take it sweet; it will be
bitter if you take it bitter” represents the typical approach of most of my respondents, particularly those with a lot of restrictions and obligations in Dubai. In close connection with their general optimism, they have a quite open vision regarding the global possibilities of life and career. Almost all of my respondents referred to their recent position as a stepping-stone to other opportunities and to a more comfortable life in another country, preferably Canada, the USA or Europe rather than the Philippines. This approach of migrants can be linked to key structural factors like the migration industry and the migrant culture that the Filipino state has been producing and reproducing in years. As Juan Jr. (2000: 229), in his analysis of the peculiarities of the Filipino diaspora vividly points out, Filipino identification is not with a fully-defined nation but with regions, localities and communities of languages and traditions because the homeland was long colonized by Western powers (Spain and the United States) and has remained neo-colonized despite formal or nominal independence. Therefore, rather than a national (state-related) sense of belonging, regional ties (family or kinship webs in villages, towns or provincial regions) and cultural identifications, a shared history of colonial and racial subordination and alienation in the host country based on “Filipino identity” seems to form the basis of Filipino transnationalism (Juan Jr., 2000: 236). This has one important implication for the research that I conducted: though intra-communal socio-economic differences seem to play an important role in Filipino migrants’ diverse experiences with their socio-spatial identification with Dubai, in general they share a transnational identification that does not seem to be specifically place-bound but is instead, more flexible. In other words, despite the hardships in Dubai their decision to live either in a host or their home country is based on an overriding desire to lead a “good” life.

The definition of what it means to live a good life is not only bound to material conditions but is also tied to the ability to be socially and physically mobile in a global context through Filipino networks worldwide. It was possible to sense this unbounded mental and practical attitude in my individual interviews regarding the ability to be “happy” anywhere in the world, as well as frequent references to home, its beauty and social comforts. These references, however, do not necessarily carry nationalistic and place-bound connotations. Instead, they refer to family, natural beauty in the hometown and a freer daily life at home than in Dubai. According to Juan Jr. (2000: 236), once Filipinos feel secure materially they may desire to return home; otherwise, they move their parents and other relatives to their place of employment in countries where family reunification is allowed, like the US, Italy or Canada. The UAE’s migration policy also creates the “transient” nature of the city space and the feeling of being temporary in the nature of the migrants’ relationship to the host country (Elsheshtawy, 2008). Most of the respondents answered the question: “if you are given citizenship in UAE, would you consider to stay permanently or longer?” in the affirmative, despite the UAE government having recently labeled its large expatriate population as ‘temporary workers’ as opposed to immigrant workers, and having made it impossible for expatriates of any kind to obtain citizenship, irrespective of the number of years spent in the country (Elsheshtawy, 2008: 971). So it is clear in most of my respondents’ narratives that if there is a chance to get a permanent status in UAE and therefore to be “upwardly mobile” this seems to fulfill their desire for a “good life”.

“Utang na Loob”7: Remittances

As discussed above, my respondents’ narratives suggested a quite detached, more cosmopolitan migrant position, though at the same time, they often referred to strong kinship bonds and
commitments. Without exception, every interviewee reported sending money regularly to their families (particularly to their parents to cover the education costs of their brothers and sisters). They considered this a normal and legitimate duty. However, what makes the Filipino migrants’ remittance system quite unique is that their responsibilities are not only restricted to their immediate family but are also extended to wider kin, with many of my respondents sending money to support the education of their nephews or more distant relatives. These remittances represent quite a high proportion of their income, with the percentage ranging between 40 and 50 percent of their monthly salary. However, if the migrants have their own children and partners back in Philippines, this percentage can go even higher. As gathered from my respondents’ narratives, sending back money to the Philippines is predominantly an emotionally fulfilling experience that expresses gratitude to their families. Aside from the emotional argument, sending money back home is also a policy-related obligation, especially given its role as one of the major drivers of the local economy. Under the Republic Act no. 8042, known as the “Magna Carta” for migrants, the Filipino state seems to guarantee the rights of Filipinos working overseas, but this limited context of “secured rights” comes with obligations (Rodriguez, 2002: 347-48). The Code of Discipline for Overseas Filipino Workers, which defines a Filipino overseas contract workers’ duties to family, employer, host state and the Philippine government, states that a Filipino contract worker is:

To abide by the terms and conditions of his employment contract, to behave in the best manner and tradition of a Filipino and to observe and respect the laws, customs, mores, traditions and practices of the country where he is working. It shall also be his obligation to abide with the requirements on remittance of earnings as well as to provide material help to his family during the period of his overseas employment.


In this regard, the migrants I interviewed remit a considerable part of their salaries to their families. Familial assistance patterns within Philippines are characteristically described as reciprocal and thus carry a sense of obligation or “utang na loob”, translated as a “debt of prime obligation” (Tyner, 2009: 154). This has a direct impact on their monetary freedom and the nature of these obligations is one of the major determinants that leads to intra-communal differences. In other words, migrants can be categorized according to the degree of their obligations to their families back in the Philippines. First of all, there are married migrants with spouses and children back in the Philippines who generally remit 60 to 70 percent of their incomes because their spouses in the Philippines either earn very low salaries or have no permanent jobs. One remarkable example of this is a young man in his late 20’s who works as a salesman in a shoe store and whose wife and children are living together with his parents in the same house in the Philippines. Alvin reported suffering from very restricted financial conditions in Dubai:

M: So can you save some money?

A: Very little money, because my little brother is studying there and I sent him money and it is little bit expensive [referring to school], so all my money I am spending for education...
M: How much of your money you are sending to Philippines? A: Like I said, all mam...

His female colleague: He is a good father and good husband. Every time he is chatting with his kids.

A: Actually I have only now 50 dirham [taking the money out of his pocket and showing to me], I’ll spend it for how many days? [It was the beginning of the month and he had still 20 days to survive on this money] Two boys mam, 10 years old and 5 years old.

M: You should be missing them a lot.

A: Too much. Every time I am calling them. Because when I left, my five-years-old son, still around two, so they don’t know me, only on Internet. Before, he is calling me, aaa in Philippines you will call your elder brother, Kuya. So he is calling me Kuya not father, papa. So from the time we are chatting, every day I am telling so, he is used to cease elder brother. Now he is saying only Papa.

The second category of migrants under varying degrees of obligations are single migrants from low-income family backgrounds who are obliged to send 40 to 50 percent of their salary to their parents, mostly for the survival needs of the family and educational needs of their siblings. A good example of this condition is a single migrant in her mid-20’s who works in sales seven days a week, nine hours a day. During the interview, Hazel talked about how her boss treated her: sometimes calling her “stupid” or promising off-days but never fulfilling them. Discussing this made her break down in tears. While talking about her hopelessness, she kept saying: “I need to send money to my parents”. Even though she was unhappy with her current job, she explained that she was not in a position to risk her job by trying to change to another one right now.

M: So can I ask you how much you are earning?

H: 2000 only.

M: You are working everyday?

H: Yes mam. Very difficult mam even the salary, if I want something, I can’t buy because I need to send also to my family.

M: How much of your salary you are sending to Philippines?

H: Aaaa, 750. At the end of the month I need to borrow from my friend. For my food.

A third category of migrants with regards to remittance obligations are the single migrants from relatively well-to-do families. Mary-Ann is one of these relatively comfortable migrants. She mentioned her desire to change jobs in the future if she can find a better position. Generally, if such single migrants do not have heavy obligations to family than they think of their recent jobs as stepping-stones and embrace opportunities for physical and social mobility:

M: You are feeling more happy here?
M.A.: I think more, because I am working, I can buy what I want. I can also send money to my mum and I can take for myself and I can afford also. Little by little I can buy not at once.

M: What percentage of your income are you sending to your country?

M.A.: Only 25% and the remaining for me. Cause I don’t have brother going to school. Everybody working [referring to her siblings], so only my mother and my dad. Everybody is sending money to my parents not only me.

Thus, my interviews reveal that the migrant workers in all three conditions view sending money back as an obligation, but not a restricting one. Instead, they see it as returning a favor or perpetuating a beloved tradition. Whether they suffer from difficult living conditions or whether their family is relatively well-to-do, they see it as their duty, not one that has been harshly forced upon them, but one that is emotionally fulfilling. Gina’s statement is representative in that sense:

M: Are you sending money?

G: Yaa, of course, because you know this is our life. Many people are dependent on you. You cannot run away from that. Not lesser than 10,000 pesos. Let’s say 1000 dirham. And the balance I will divide for myself for my everything.

M: Do you have brothers, sisters in Philippines? Are you helping them?

G: Actually no, I am the youngest so I am just helping my parents and my niece. Because I have one sister but now she is widow and I am trying to help her. She has six kids. It is very difficult for her. [She is helping her sister]

She is 41 years old and it is very difficult also for her to apply for a job. So for us, our sister, also we need to help. So a bit heavier responsibility for me. Because the one, you know, her daughter which is under my responsibility now is going to college. I always believe in the saying you will reap what you sow. If I will plant something good in their heart. This, what I am going get from them. Even though I am not expecting anything material from them. There are some good things they will give me back.

The weight of remittances or, in other words, familial obligations define the lifestyles and perception of migrants about Dubai, their “home” (Philippines) and future. Although all of my respondents mentioned their aspirations to plan their budgets and cut their spending as much as possible, those with less financial power felt more restricted and spatially imprisoned in work and home spaces.

V-Spatial Restrictions in the City, Isolation at Home

The common challenge that young Filipinos in sales share is their domestic spatial isolation due to socio-economic restrictions and personal preferences. Almost all of my respondents spend their off-days at home without going out or spending time in the malls. If they go out, they generally go to supermarkets close to their home, which sell traditional Filipino cooking ingredients. When asked what they do on off-days, most of them refer to off-days as days for, washing laundry, ironing, cleaning the house, shopping and web-chatting with loved ones in the
Philippines. The following explanation by Analyn is typical of most of my respondents:

**M:** After work what are you doing? How do you spend your time?

**A:** I am a homebody [laughter]. In fact I directly go home, clean the house, washed my things.

**M:** For example, on your off-days, where do you shop for your food or other things?

**A:** Just here in Hypermarket (Hyper Panda), and there are also other stores near my house.

**M:** Do you go to other malls just to spend time?

**A:** If I really need to buy something, I will go there but if there is nothing I need to buy, I am not going.

In the course of this conversation, I learned that Analyn manages on very little after sending money back to the Philippines. Therefore, she was reluctant to spend time in shopping malls unless she really needed something to buy. Spending time at home is adopted by almost all of the migrants as a money-saving strategy. However, while some are obliged to rely on this strategy all the time due to their heavier obligations, others have the flexibility to ignore it from time to time. It is not all true to say that staying at home is merely a strategy to save money on the part of the migrants. They often mentioned their preference for staying at home after an exhausting working day. In addition, the home space for them symbolizes a connection with home because apart from their domestic tasks, they spend most of their time chatting with their loved ones back home via the Internet. The following statement is a very typical one in that respect:

*aaaa like when I came home from work. Just in the house. In my off day, chatting with my family. With webcam, they want to see me I want to see them. First hour, I will talk with my mom. Second like this, you know. I want to see them all also. After that I need to change the bed sheet, washing everything, cleaning the house. That is all.*

My respondents generally reported that their homes were crowded, with usually 10 to 15 people per apartment and 3-4 people per room. In some cases, even married couples shared their rooms with others. It is interesting to note that, despite the law, local landlords and the authorities in Dubai implicitly tolerate or overlook Filipinos living as single males, females and married couples in the same house. My respondents refer to this informal neglect on the part of the authorities as an exception they make only for Filipinos. Their living together, sometimes even with people whose names they do not know, reflects the practical necessity of sharing DEWA, rent and other costs of the house. Generally, the housework is done on rotation, with cleaning, cooking and the kitchen budget being shared. In order to simply take a shower, my informants reported how they needed to discuss individual timings clearly and wake up early in the morning before going to work. Household responsibilities in such crowded houses also bind people to the home space due to the unwillingness of the migrants to waste money by going out on off-days.

My second question regarding spatial isolation was to learn to how much these young educated migrants knew about places beyond their residential areas and working environment, and if they spent time in these places. In most cases, my respondents’ knowledge of the city was limited to their homes and workplaces. On their off-days, when they wanted to spend time outside of their
homes, they went to places close to their workplaces. If they spent time in a mall, they preferred the mall they worked in or small malls close to their residence. The following quote by Grace is representative:

*M: Which parts of the city do you know best?*

*G: Part of Dubai? because I am here in Souk al Bahar in Dubai Mall, sometimes I am in Festival City. Mostly because I am starting in Festival City then they open this shop and open Dubai Marina, I know these places.*

*M: So you know the areas surrounding Festival City?*

*G: Yes.*

*M: Do you have off-days?*

*G: Yes.*

*M: In your off-days or after the work what are you doing?*

*G: In general I am going home and sleep. Sometimes shopping like that...* In general, the city regions like Deira, Karama and Satwa, which are easily accessible by all migrants and in which Filipino migrants from various cultural capital positions live are known by most of my respondents. Most of them prefer to shop in these places, particularly in Deira:

*G: My routine is MOE [Mall of Emirates] to Bur Dubai, Bur Dubai to MOE, because you are also, when I come I feel tired also. Even your body is tired. If you are mentally ok, you will feel fresh. But if you are mentally tired your body is also ineffective.*

*M: So which part of the city do you know best?*

*G: Hmm. Only Bur Dubai.*

*M: Which parts do you like best? For example, do you go to other shopping malls?*

*G: Nooo. I like Souk.*

*M: Souk? Which souks?*

*G: In Deira, in Bur Dubai Souk, nice... Cause I don’t know I just feel more comfortable with the people. I feel like being together with realistic people [she meant real people]. Not like here [referring to Mall of Emirates] That is why. Because here I don’t know, because everyday I am here, see all these people, it is like ordinary for me. I don’t like these people who are trying to, you know, thinking that they are somebody else although they are so different. Ok I am not the right person to judge them but I don’t know. Just I am irritated, feel like that. But when you go to this place [souk] you’ll see who really they are. The way they talk, the way they dress. The real one. That is why I like to go to Souk.*
In terms of city planning, Dubai can be considered a city that inevitably excludes low-wage groups. This is due to the inadequate public transport system, the dominance of private cars as a means of transport and the neglect of pedestrian circulation by urban planners. As Elsheshtawy (2008: 968) comments, “Dubai is not a city in the conventional sense, but rather a ‘set of cities’, connected by a network of highways, where there is hardly any pedestrian circulation and everything is geared towards consumption”. Elsheshtawy (2008: 973) mainly emphasizes the isolation of construction workers from the city, living in labour camps suffering very difficult living conditions:

For most of these workers the city represents a distant image which can only be seen from buses taking them from their accommodations to the construction sites. On weekends travel to the city is either too expensive or they simply prefer to stay with their compatriots at the camps.

From some of my respondents’ narratives, it is possible to say that it is not only construction workers but also some well-educated, young Filipino migrants working in sales for whom the city and its most popular tourist sites (aside from the mall they work in) represent a distant image. For this reason, some respondents with heavier familial obligations reported a different way of relating themselves to the city than those who were financially better off with lighter obligations to their families. Some of the former group, despite spending more than a year in Dubai, had not seen the most touristy sites in Dubai, such as the Burj al Arab or Jumeirah. The following comments by Alvin, quoted, above also exemplify this migrant position:

M: Are you going out with your friends?

A: Sometimes. If there is extra time, like I have day off, so I can have extra time. Most of the time in the house. I am not the kind of person moving around.

M: So if you go out where do you go?

A: I want to explore Dubai, I have been for two years in Dubai but I don’t know these famous places. So that is why if I have extra money I can do such things. I can go to these places. But for now I am staying at home.

M: So which part of the city do you know best?

A: Deira, it is a very accessible place, everybody there. You may go and that is the first place I know in Dubai.

On the other hand, as defined previously, migrants with lighter obligations towards their families and with stronger cultural capital are also more mobile in the city. They are better integrated into the social space of the city, spending a considerable time out of their houses, and are able to integrate more with people from other ethnicities. Edwin, who was quoted before, explains what he does in his off days as follows:

M: So how do you spend time after work?

E: It differs actually. If I have free time sometimes I am going out with my friends. Watching movies, most of the time we went to the park.
M: Which park?

E: Actually I went to Zabeel Park, Jumeirah Park, we went to Mamzar Park. Sometimes watch movie, sometimes we are staying in the house, watching also. Sometimes dinner outside...

M: Where do you go for dining?

E: Generally we went to TGIF sometimes or Chili’s, it depends on our mood. After the dinner we went, I forget the name of the bar... We are going to game shop, just to relax. Singing...

M: So which malls do you prefer to go?

Actually Mall of Emirates is more accessible for us, because Mall of Emirates is all you have to do is to take a taxi, or you can go by car. It is more accessible to us in the road way [they have a car].

In sum, the single migrants whose families are in relatively better socio-economic condition in the Philippines and who live with their siblings or with very close friends in Dubai seem to be more mobile in the city. They are better integrated into the consumer and social spaces of the city and they have friends from different nationalities and class positions. On the other hand, migrants with heavier obligations seem to be more restricted in the domestic sphere and perceive Dubai as just a “money saving-place”. They also see Dubai as a temporary settlement and seem to place hopes for a better life in another region in the world or for better job prospects in the Philippines. Paradoxically, they are the ones who are unable to take risks to change jobs and/or country. These migrants are also socially quite isolated and they barely have any friends outside of their work place or from other nationalities.

Concluding Points

• The ethnic hierarchy in Dubai and “pleasant” stereotypes associated with Filipino migrants put this group in a more privileged position when compared to other migrant groups from Asia. However, the ethnic division of labor seems to cause a bigger frustration for these migrants considering their high cultural capital.

• Contrary to expectations, Filipino young migrants with heavy financial obligations with considerably high cultural capital present quite similar patterns with migrants from lower occupational and financial categories in terms of their perceptions of the city, daily routine, social relations and spatial restrictions.

• Despite the fact that all of the migrants interviewed have college/university education, other factors that crosscut cultural capital like gender, family background, marital status, and financial obligations lead to considerable differences within the Filipino workers in sales with regards to their opportunities, existence in the city and relations with other groups. It seems that financial restrictions put certain migrants in a “forced diaspora” situation in which they are physically present in Dubai but continue their social and emotional attachment only with the Philippines.
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1 As understood from Philippines-based migration statistics, United Arab Emirates constitutes the second top destination for Filipino migrants in 2012 ranked after Saudi Arabia by the number of deployed migrants: 177,461 (POEA, 2012: 5).
2 This constitutes, as Elsheshtawy (2008: 973) points out, an implicit rather than explicit ban on the mobility of unskilled workers. Besides their insufficient economic resources and certain restrictions on their mobility, particularly in the case of domestic workers, urban planning in Dubai also isolates them from the city space. Their exclusion from middle- or upper-middle class consumer-spaces depends on a variety of cues and measures that communicate that they are not welcome. For instance, luxurious retail developments, such as the Mall of Emirates or Madinat Jumeirah, are located in places designed to be primarily accessible by car (for similar discussions, see Vora, 2008: 388).
3 This classification is inspired by Umut Erel (2010: 650), who argued, in his study on the role of cultural capital in migration studies that migrant communities from different nations and class positions cannot be taken as a homogenous category within themselves and how they make use of their cultural capital show variations from one migrant to another due to differences of gender, class, educational status and ethnic affiliation.
4 Kababayan refers to Filipino compatriots and is a key term in conceptualizing contemporary Philippine international migration (Hosoda, 2013: 19). In her study on “Kababayan street community”, Hosoda (2013) examines the encounters of the Filipino migrants from different class positions and the ways that they get socialized on the streets and public places in UAE.
5 Hosoda (2003) classifies Filipino expatriates in UAE into three broad categories as: professionals, “ordinary workers” (including semi-skilled and skilled workers) and domestic workers.
6 Erel mostly emphasizes an emerging need in migration studies to override these identifications that tackle migrant communities as homogenous. Intra-group differentiations (in the analysis of migrant groups) needs to be taken into account so as not to reify national identity as the key organizing category for creating cultural capital (Erel, 2010: 649).
7 Utang na Loob refers to debt of prime obligation.
8 “The overseas migrants are considered by the Filipino state as ‘new national heroes’ for two reasons: first, migrants contribute to the economy through their remittances, which amount to several billion dollars every year; second, there is evidence that the deployment of OCW’s may have blunted the Communist insurgency as well, by draining the sea of rural discontent in which the guerillas thrive” (Rodriguez, 2002: 347).
9 DEWA refers to Dubai Electricity and Water Authority. In daily usage, when they say DEWA, the migrants refer to electricity and water bills.