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Digital Family Ethnography: Lessons from Fieldwork amongst Indonesians in Australia

Monika Winarnita

Abstract

This article discusses the opportunities and constraints in using a digital family ethnography for qualitative studies amongst Indonesians in Australia. The first half of the article highlights the opportunities that online and offline participant observation can provide in terms of understanding family transnational networks. Going beyond an ego-based narrative approach in interviews, digital family ethnography shows how social network analysis and reflexivity can bring depth to a study on family by including the researcher's position vis-à-vis the research participants. The second half of the article discusses challenges in using these combined online and offline methods and how these challenges might be mitigated in future studies. In particular, the article look at problems faced with interviews, multimedia usage, and social media analysis related to the researcher's background and in working with different age groups. In the transnational family context, social media and electronic communication are critical parts of contemporary ethnographic methodologies, and the discussion thus centres on including online personhood in the research. The study concludes that although digital family ethnography methodologies have limitations, they can be used to account for the transforming relationships that make up family mobility.

Introduction

This paper outlines of the opportunities and constraints in using digital family ethnography in longitudinal studies on family relationships where there is a primary focus on researcher participation. Life narrative methods combined with ethnography have been useful for large-scale sociological studies of families where practice-based research with a social work intervention outcome might be needed (Harold et al. 2015, 39). However, for studies that focus on how migrants maintain family relations transnationally, a digital family ethnography provides a more relevant research methodology to understand, not only the maintenance of transnational family networks, but also how certain information and communications technologies (ICTs) provide a social and cultural context to family life (Wilding 2006, 125). Given this potential, this article looks at the opportunity in a transnational context to use digital family ethnographic method with a combination of features, such as ego-centred social network analysis, narrative-based interviews with participants' family members, and participant observation of communication in a variety of offline and online contexts (e.g., Facebook, personal messages, photo and video

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social media uploads), and discussion of online presence. Using these methods provides opportunities for researchers to engage with multigenerational perspectives, as exemplified in this article's case studies of Indonesian mothers in Australia and their young adult children.

Ego-centred analysis emphasises the networks among family members, friends, and community from the perspective of individual participants, including the researcher's active presence in the online and offline community they are living in, which affects the participants. Understanding how migration affects family networks often requires a long-term presence of the researcher in both online and offline community lives. The family background of a researcher can therefore present unique challenges and opportunities in terms of how they and their family fit into participants' social networks and whether they are seen as community insiders. Doing field work involves the negotiation of meaning and identity between researchers and participants (Hoon 2006, 97). Conducting additional separate interviews and observing participants' activities on anonymous online forums may augment the data collected through traditional ego-centred analysis. In particular, this combination of methods helps to understand the gap between what is presented online of family relationships and what is absent online but emphasised in explanations given offline, such as strained relationships or family structures that are not ideal (e.g., divorced parents or being part of a single-parent family).

This paper is part of a project on Southeast Asia, family, and migration in the global era. The author conducted fieldwork amongst Indonesian professional migrant women in Melbourne, Australia. The study took place from 2015 to 2017 and involved twenty Indonesian women residing in Australia with transnational family relationships. The article draws on six of the twenty participants' repeat interviews (two interviews per person), which were semiformal and lasted up to one hour. It also includes participant observation with these six participants and their family members over six months in social settings, such as visiting their homes and going to family outings with them. The participants also consented to the researcher doing online participant observation for over a year as an invited Facebook friend for the purpose of collecting data about their social media activities, such as posting of family photos online. The article itself focuses on the experiences of employing a digital family ethnography methodology in fieldwork, in particular, reflecting on the researcher's identity within the community under study and how it impacts the research. In addition, the article looks at the ways observations of social media platforms in fieldwork relate to intergenerational family dynamics. The opportunities and constraints of digital family ethnography are thus outlined in the context of transnational communities.

Methodology: Digital Family Ethnography

Ethnographies, as a study and systematic recording of human cultures or "a social science descriptive work of peoples with their customs, habits, and mutual differences" (Hoey 2014, 3), have been widely used in family migration studies for their ability to elucidate the textures of everyday life and the feelings and strategies of mobile people (Olwig 2007; Baldassar et al. 2017). More importantly, ethnographies provide alternative and culturally

specific understandings of what constitutes a family, beyond the generic or idealised nuclear family (Hayami 2012). Digital ethnographies in studies of family migration, in particular Mirca Madianou's (2016) work on ambient kinship, as well as Madianou and Miller's (2011) and Horst and Miller's (2013) studies on polymedia, have provided nuanced perspectives on family migration. Madianou and Miller's new theoretical development of polymedia tries to understand the consequences of digital media in the context of interpersonal communication, in their case through the use of digital media by Filipina domestic workers. Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (2013) describe, not only how new media mediate the mother-child relationship, but how, in turn, being a mother mediates migrant women's choice and use of polymedia (Horst and Miller 2013, 21). Polymedia thus includes "expanding media and communicative ecologies to consider the interactivity between new media and the importance of the emotional repertoire" (Horst and Miller 2013, 19). Polymedia also affords what Madianou calls "ambient co-presence" in studies of digital kinship, or "the peripheral yet intense awareness of distant others made possible through the affordances of ubiquitous media environments" (2016, 1). These recent ethnographic studies of transnational family have provided the groundwork for a specific methodological approach of digital family ethnography.

This article adds to the growing body of literature on digital ethnography with family members in a migration context by exploring the opportunities and constraints presented by three distinct combinations of digital family ethnography methodologies: (1) ego-centred online and offline social network analysis, (2) family narrative through a storyboard comprised of social media posts, and (3) autobiographical reflexivity of the ethnographer's position vis-à-vis the research participants.

The first methodology holds potential to extend the discussion of ego-centred social network analysis (Ellen and Firth 1984) into the digital realm. In this study, the digital family ethnography starts with each main research participant (the ego), recruited through the researcher's various social networks, who has agreed to be "friended" or followed online on their social media sites, interviewed face to face, and observed both offline and online by the researcher through participant observation. This social network analysis thus concentrates on in-depth understanding of a small number of families and their social networks offline and online. It is similar to the everyday situation of engaging in one's various and possibly separate friendship networks that spread across an urban area. In this analysis using digital ethnographic methodology, priority was given to taking part in offline or day-to-day major events for the families or community to which the research participants belong and following the social media uploads of these events. This methodology concentrated both on certain central actors in the network, as well as those in relationships with them. This included offline and online participant observation of the intimate relationships within the heteronormative nuclear family (which we concentrated on), as well as the family's close social networks and their loose network of the larger transnational community. Analysis of the patterns of relations both online and offline allowed a "thick" description (Geertz 1973) to facilitate understanding of the family within their migrant community network.

The second digital family ethnography methodology used was the face-to-face interview

storytelling method, or family narrative (Harold et al. 2015). This method asks participants to tell the story of their family, guided by questions such as “I’d like you to tell me about your family as if it is a story with a beginning, a middle and how things will look in the future” (Harold et al. 2015, 6), and to illustrate the story using a digital storyboard created by going through the participants’ social media postings of photos, videos, comments, and links with each participant. In this process, an outline of the family story is created, with milestones such as “your relationship before the birth of your first child,” “becoming a parent,” and “living with said child” (Harold et al. 2015, 7). Because the parts of a digital storyboard for a family narrative are similar to the categories in the ego in-depth interview and are set out in a linear fashion, there is potential for replication in the research to provide ease of categorical analysis of the online data. The nuclear family members, such as spouse, parents, siblings, and children, can be asked to tell the digital story of their family using the narrative guidance or storyboard method, with the ego (the research participant) referred to as the central point (e.g., your relationship to your spouse/child/sibling/parent before migration/after migration, before children/after children). This process can also be tailored to the participant (e.g., a skilled professional migrant woman may not have a spouse and children and so may refer to her parents and siblings or to a particular clan as her family).

The last methodology used was an “auto-biographical” (Hoey 2014, 3) component of digital family ethnography methodology that includes the ethnographer’s position through their own social media sites that connect to the research participants, their various forms of offline and online relationship with the participants, and the involvement in the research of their own family, identity, and experience. As Brian Hoey argues, “ethnography should be acknowledged as a mutual product born of the intertwining of the lives of the ethnographer and his or her subjects” (2014, 3). Ethnography, in Hoey’s view, is not only “the explicit professional project of observing, imagining and describing other people” (3). Rather, “good ethnography recognizes the transformative nature of fieldwork where as we search for answers to questions about people we may find ourselves in the stories of others” (3).

Challenges in Practice as an “Insider”

Lara Descartes’s (2007) argument for the use of ethnography in family research covers both rewards and challenges, with the main challenge being the issue of how personal identity and power may impact the relationship between the ethnographer and research participants, as well as the ways in which private and public space [of the family] affect the ethnographic process (Descartes 2007, 22). The first challenge is inevitable for researchers with similar cultural backgrounds to the research participants, as presented in this article. Research participants are more likely to challenge someone who they see as “one of them” with similar cultural backgrounds and life trajectories. When the researcher asks research participants about their family, observes their interactions with their family (participant observation), and communicates with members of their family, participants often also ask about and want to engage with the researcher’s family to share their family experience, a request that is implicit in the researcher-participant engagement. Some research participants, feeling a sense of shared background and the researcher’s empathy to their life story, want to have an ongoing friendship beyond that of researcher and participant. Anthropologists

often experience this in fieldwork where they become initiated members of the family or clan in order to become accepted (see Winarnita and Herriman, 2012).

In contrast to the mixed outcomes when the researcher has insider status, participants in studies where researchers were not accorded insider status were willing to explain simple concepts without assuming the researcher would understand, and the researcher was able to take on the position of a learner or cultural novice (Göransson 2011, 910). An immersive atmosphere may allow the researcher to socialise with multiple generations as a visiting distant relative, but the intertwining of the participant and their family could also be limited by how the researcher is placed within age and cultural divisions. Being marked as a distinct outsider can be an advantage for interviews when the researcher guarantees anonymity between family members (Caldas and Caldas 2005, 347). Nevertheless, being seen as a cultural insider may facilitate the building of rapport that is necessary to understand the gap between online and offline representations of family relationships discussed at length in the next section of the article.

Having a similar background to the majority of the research participants—in this study, being an Indonesian migrant woman residing in Australia with an Australian spouse and three young children—presents challenges. Research participants expect an insider knowledge and perspective from the researcher and an ongoing commitment beyond the research relationship, such as becoming a close friend of the family. However, as Kirin Narayan (1993) discussed in literature about the insider researcher, there are knowledge and power differentials that must be taken into account. A researcher is never fully an insider, always having multiple positions, and thus is an “outsider” researcher reflecting on her participant observation practice and positionality. Kamala Visweswaran, in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (1994), argues convincingly that when researching with women of similar cultural background, one can experience an “assumption of a universal sisterhood between women” (1994, 41). Thus, one must be aware of the unequal power relations between researcher and participants, in addition to the micro-political aspects of research and of social practices in general (Visweswaran 1994, 41). Visweswaran further argues that the self-reflexivity in one’s methodology does not reach the level of deconstructive ethnography. She writes, “Self-reflexive [ethnography] questions its own authority; deconstructive [ethnography] attempts to abandon its authority, knowing that it is impossible to do so” (1994, 79). One is therefore never able to truly be a full insider. Researchers always have a multiple identity, an identity with a mixed background where, depending on the context, situations, and relations of power, different aspects of one’s identity are at times more highlighted, either by choice or forced on them as a defining identity (Narayan 1993, 671). Narayan (1993) refers to insiders who write about their own cultures from a position of intimate affinity, acknowledging their particular personal locations, and admits the limit of understanding from an insider position.

Challenges: What is Shown and Hidden Online and Offline

The second challenge in the method of obtaining a family narrative (structured into a beginning, middle, and future) is its demand for particular kinds of “official” narratives

of interviewees. Queer and feminist studies of kinship (e.g., Weston 1991) question how discourse might hide or make unintelligible particular kinds of intimacy. In particular, what kinds of relationships and intimacy is digital family ethnography as a method able to show? What does the gap between what can be seen and what is hidden suggest? Arguably the most interesting kinds of data emerge at the points where people attempt to present certain kinds of selves, and a demand for consistency emerges in regard to online and offline narratives of the self. The demands for authenticity and consistency of the modern self that Erving Goffman noted in 1959 have not diminished in the digital age.

In this research study, the majority of the research participants' family members who agreed to speak to the researcher offline and/or be recorded did so with the main participant (ego)—either their mother or their daughter—also present at the interview, which affected the data or information given depending on the relationship and expectations of the ego and her family member. Nevertheless, a researcher who conducts ethnographic methodology in a cross-cultural context must be attentive to interview and participant observation nuances where family members are at times expected to be present (see Ball and Beazley, under review). For example, although the social media postings of a visiting Indonesian grandmother, Tuti, who arrived after the birth of her half-Anglo Australian granddaughter, Jasmin, show many smiling photos of the three generations (grandmother Tuti, daughter Indah, and granddaughter Jasmin) in tourist sites, at home, and at community events, there was not a single photo with the Anglo Australian son-in-law, Bob. (All names of research participants and family members are pseudonyms.) This online absence hid the strained family relationship occurring offline. Tuti spent the two-hour interview session (at a café with her skilled migrant daughter Indah and baby granddaughter Jasmin) recounting her recent fight with Bob and all their disagreements over parenting and cultural values on what is best for the baby. At one point Tuti was crying very emotionally and Indah referred to the session as being about her mother *curhat* (Jakarta slang of *curah hati*, or the Indonesian equivalent of spilling her heart or having a “heart to heart” conversation with a close friend).

The face-to-face interview structure often did not follow the prescribed structure of the one recommended for the ego in social network analysis (Ellen and Firth 1984), and it also varied according to what the family members were used to. For example, a university-age daughter, Elisa, was interviewed and was always present as a moral support to her Indonesian migrant mother Eka (ego). Eka and Elisa “tag” each other’s Facebook accounts on social media on a regular basis and update their weekly social activities showing their close relationship. Elisa was also present at Eka’s face-to-face interview to help her mother sound more professional, Eka explained. Elisa is more proficient in English than her mother, and is also used to being interviewed by mass media through her activities in Indonesian cultural dance and musical performances in Australia, thus she is used to explaining things for Eka, who organises and choreographs the dance performances. In this case and in the case of a participant named Cintami and her sister, Chandra, who is a well-known musical artist in Australia, the face-to-face interviews became structured by these family members. Because both Elisa and Chandra were performers and were accustomed to media interviews and they curated public relations personas on their social media accounts. This example represents one way that research participants try to present certain kinds of selves,

and it points to the demand for consistency of online and offline narratives of the self. In this case, other ethnographic participant observation activities in addition to the face-to-face interview and social media uploads were necessary to understand the full complexity of the family relationship. What was never shown (or was hidden to an extent) on social media was the divorces of the young adults' (Elisa and the sisters Chandra and Cintami) respective parents. The difference between the online and offline image also reveals how curating mother-daughter intimacy online is a way to manage their offline relationship. Being divorced, the mothers of these young women depend on them for emotional and social support, to the point that the daughters curate their mothers' social media profile and updates to ensure a consistent image of a happy family life.

The family ethnography method is to interview ego together with family members, if this is a possibility, and to conduct separate interviews as well. The strategy of having additional separate interviews with parent and adult child allows the researcher to focus more on a single participant and helps mitigate the possibility of embarrassment, conflicting narratives, and egocentric interviews. For example, an individual interview with Indah, who was having marital problems with her Anglo Australian spouse Bob, provided additional data to the joint interview with Indah and her visiting mother, specifically about Indah's Indonesian family's increased status and social capital that were at stake and invested in the marriage. In the case of this family, the gap between the online image presented of the self (and, by extension, of the family) and the strained offline family relationships was only made visible through building rapport in individual interviews. Similarly, it was only at the individual interview with the young adult daughter Elisa that she was able to reveal how dependent her mother Eka was on her for support and well-being after her divorce. On the other hand, individual interviews also limit the unstructured interactions and cross-commentary between family members that occur in family interviews, which also hold potential to allow deeper understanding of intergenerational relationships.

Because interviews with family members may not be possible or permitted based on the social position of the researcher, other ethnographic methods, particularly participant observation of online public (social media) posts, can complement and form part of the "family" component of the research when interviews cannot. Deirdre McKay (2010, 486) compares online personas to the Melanesian concept of a *dividual* to explain how different social rules around self-representation online allow people to express themselves in a totally different manner than they do offline. Dividual personhood expresses the differences between online and offline community building. In transnational contexts, we might expect new expressions of relationships and communities constructed through the sharing structure of the media itself (McKay 2010, 488).

The multimedia aspects of photographic and textual representations in social media in particular allow for differences in self-expression because they can be manipulated to present the ego in different ways to different audiences. However, intergenerational relationships can limit the researcher's access to the full spectrum of a research participant's online content. An example of this challenge in this family ethnography research occurred when a divorced mother, as the ego, posted about what her children write about her on social media. This divorced mother discussed with the researcher the Facebook posts she

puts up about her young adult and older teenage children and the positive posts her children put up about her on other social media platforms. Through selective posting, the mother is able to show her Facebook friends certain representations of her children and the positives of being a single-parent family in her effort to counter the negativity surrounding divorced women—thus she is presenting an alternative form of idealised mothering. The online absence of a father figure presents a specific single-parent family image that highlights the mother’s role, and the offline relationships the mother and children have are not presented on social media because they detract from the consistency of the mother’s presented self-image. This example reflects the argument by Amparo Lasén and Edgar Gomez-Cruz that “the visibility afforded by the display of self-images finds in the other’s gaze, which become (*sic*) an embodied form of recognition, the guarantee of the subject’s being. Being visible, being present, in front of a crowd of strangers is one of the aspects of being public which nowadays is performed at the junction of online and offline places” (2009, 214). The challenge for researchers is therefore to discuss with their research participants online posting that will yield significant data beyond building initial rapport with these participants.

Multi-platform Social Media Accounts

It is important to note that although this project only had ethics clearance for social media contact through Facebook, various social media platforms connect to each other automatically. For example, a Facebook Messenger message will automatically show up on your Skype message if you have Skype open and that person is in your Skype contact list. For both Indonesian and Singaporean participants, the use of WhatsApp as a cheaper alternative to SMS is important; WhatsApp automatically imports a user’s contact list from their mobile phone and links it to their Facebook profile. This feature was useful in this longitudinal study for maintaining relationships with research participants over the three years of research. When researchers are not based in the fieldwork country, the more convenient and cheaper WhatsApp or Facebook messenger enables them to maintain conversation-based messaging internationally, instead of using expensive SMS, the sometimes impractical Skype, or the more formal email.

Another research avenue in digital family ethnography in addition to observing participants’ social media, such as Facebook, is to look at public forum social media groups as additional data sources, for example, the mixed marriage group Through Mother’s Hands (KPC Melati) that Stella, one of my research participants, belonged to. Public forum sites offer a different set of opportunities and challenges for analysing social media profiles because there is no clear ego or family network. Obtaining data from the participants’ membership in an online forum such as KPC Melati has the advantage of cross referencing information and gaining an additional understanding of the challenges and issues they face, in particular, how honestly and directly commentators would talk about subjects otherwise hidden from view because they were assured of near anonymity. An example of this additional data is a particular post Stella made on KPC Melati about relationship issues she was having with her Anglo Australian husband Tom over a clash of “cultural” values in parenting their baby daughter. The challenge of using public forums like this one as online sources for family

ethnography is that there are no visible family relationships or demographic information about commentators unless you know them offline and they have given you permission to connect with them online and they point out their membership in such group forums. Unlike Facebook or WhatsApp, blogs and forums may not be linked to offline participants if they do not identify themselves, and therefore can only be used to talk about experiences rather than relationships; public forums must be thought of as a separate field site in which respondents are as removed from the narrative of their offline selves as they choose to be, reflecting a dividual split in online and offline personhood (McKay 2010, 486). It is the websites themselves that create a structurally safe and anonymous space to talk about family relationships and intimacy issues such as marital conflicts. This method is also limited by which demographics use these forums on a regular basis. The older generation, such as Tuti or the mother who is dependent on her young adult daughters, may not be familiar with this type of forum.

Another potential research strategy of digital family ethnography is going through participants' social media with them and discussing why it was important for them to upload particular photos or videos on their Facebook, as well as discussing their use of Facebook Messenger, Skype, or other programs relevant to them. These are digital ethnography methods that have been used in family migration literature (see Madianou and Miller 2012; Horst and Miller 2013; Madianou 2016; Baldassar et al. 2017), including platforms that go beyond conventional social media and into more public and potentially anonymous expressions. During the research conducted in Melbourne between 2015 and 2017 there was discussion with the "ego" research participants of the various social media they used. In two cases, the mothers of childless Chinese Indonesian female health professionals, one a surgeon named Melani and one a dentist named Yani, used messages to accomplish transnational mothering and day-to-day micromanagement of their daughters. For example, Melani's mother, using WhatsApp, would text and call her daughter from Indonesia to wake her up every morning and to check that she had eaten lunch and ask what she had eaten. At the end of Melani's work shift, they would have a longer conversation so the mother could go through the day's events with her daughter. The dentist Yani, whose mother is also a dentist, would also have a daily phone conversation through WhatsApp on her drive to work. Despite this daily online activity, when the researcher asked whether she could interview Melani's mother while she was visiting Melbourne for three weeks, there was no reply, which is a common Indonesian cultural practice of saying no without being explicit. This is an important nonverbal activity that can be recorded in ethnographic methodology, which may not show up in a methodology with an interview focus that does not include participant observation.

Challenges in using some online tools in Southeast Asia may impact the way researchers can conduct digital family ethnography in the future. Although Skype, for example, has been researched as a tool for an alternative online form of communication and interview with research participants and their family overseas, it has not been taken up enthusiastically. Miller and Sinanan (2014) discuss how some migrants micromanage their households overseas through Skype. Some of my research participants discussed the impracticality of using Skype, with Indonesia's internet connection being unable to cope, depending on location. They also talked about a generational digital divide between them and their aging

parents. These participants use Skype only for major events, and only if the connection and timing are suitable. Their preference for WhatsApp is that, like SMS, they can take their time to answer back, it is more practical than having to set an agreed-upon time, and it is free of both the technological challenges of using a camera and having to perform an ideal image of oneself in front of the camera.

An article by Madianou and Miller (2011) about Filipina migrant women and their children also discusses micromanaging or doing day-to-day mothering transnationally through polymedia. Their findings shed light on the ambiguities, challenges, and resistance practices and strategies that occur while family members are maintaining their transnational relationships. In comparison, two of my research participants, as discussed previously, are recipients of their mother's daily transnational mothering or micromanaging. Even though they see it as a positive aspect of their relationship with a close family member, they also see themselves as having a unique family situation because of their experience growing up overseas, at times without their parents (when attending boarding school), and thus they were at ease using multiple forms of communication to maintain their family relationship and its desired intimacies.

Conclusion

This article has evaluated specific methods, such as participant observation and online media analysis, that constitute a digital family ethnography methodology. The aim was to look at the kinds of challenges these methods present in practice and how they can be avoided, such as potential embarrassment and the choice to conduct separate interviews. What works in one media context might not work in another because of how the media is structured. For example, public and anonymous social media yield different kinds of meanings and expressions of intimate relationships. One of the advantages of digital family ethnography is that it is flexible and constitutes a reflexively produced ethnographic experience. Therefore, it mirrors the dynamic nature of family networks, which may take different forms in interviews than in participant observation or social media. Using a digital ethnographic narrative of family rather than a biographical narrative allows researchers to access more of the conflicts and negotiations that are part of being family.

A digital family ethnography method used in a novel way, particularly in the context of migration, provides a multitude of opportunities to gain in-depth understanding of relationships maintained among transnational family members, although many challenges remain. Digital family ethnography involves researchers thinking in terms of family network analysis and thick description that goes beyond the personal narrative to include life events, changing relationships, and researcher reflections. In the context of transnational families, it is particularly important to include details found through participant observation and offline interviews to understand what is revealed when relationships are absent, hidden, or presented differently online. The modern self that is represented digitally transforms the concept of family networks through social media representations of family relationships and the different means of online communication amongst family members. The use of Skype calls and WhatsApp, for example, might not be viewed as a biographical detail, but it is an important part of maintaining contact and intimacy in mobile relationships.

Including an auto-biographical component in ethnography involving the researcher's family (or lack of family) in particular adds context to the way relationships develop and deepen in the field. When the lives of a researcher and their research participants are intertwined, an auto- biographical component adds depth to understanding why the research might have gone the way it did and how it might have gone differently, depending on who the researcher was and what baggage they brought with them to the field. Methods like PhotoVoice and social media analysis can be a way to engage indirectly with people on topics for which a conventional interview would be problematic, but these methods may be limiting in trying to understand absences of spouses, fathers, or sons-in-law in participants' online representations unless the researcher initially builds rapport with the participants offline. In addition, research participants may prefer to be interviewed and to engage with the researcher with their family members present (e.g., the migrant Indonesian mother who felt more comfortable when her young adult daughter helped articulate her perspectives in a more fluent and professional manner than she could, and the visiting Indonesian grandmother who wanted the support of her daughter to articulate her difficulties with her son-in-law). The cultural nuances of involving family members were therefore central in analysing both an opportunity and a constraint to understanding the dynamics of a family's transnational situation, such as in a migration context.

This article has outlined the opportunities and constraints in studying family from a social science perspective using a digital family ethnographic methodology. By doing so the article aims to add depth to researchers' understanding of the complexity of transnational family relationships, in particular by extending the possibilities of an ego-centred social network analysis (Ellen and Firth 1984) into a thick description of family relationships as they are practiced by permanent migrants, such as Indonesian women in Australia whose online and offline lives are intertwined. Digital family ethnography methods that are based on the day-to-day practice of families would therefore be useful in similar longitudinal qualitative studies of transnational families in a migration context.

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