Children Watching Children: How Filipino Children Represent and Receive News Images of Suffering

Jonathan C. Ong

It is ironic that though much has been said about spectacles of suffering, not much talk has actually centered on how images of suffering are received by audiences, much more by child audiences. Recognizing that children today operate as active seekers of information and creative interpreters of global media messages, this study is concerned about how children perceive "other" children – children afflicted by disease, children orphaned, children caught in the middle of war. Like their adult counterparts, children encounter these images almost exclusively through the prism of news broadcasts. And again, like their parents, we assume that their reactions and responses operate within discursive regimes of us and them, of heroes and villains, of risk and safety – or do they really? How do Filipino children perceive otherness in the media and how do they talk about them? From analyzing their drawings about what they assume to be the "problems" of nearby and faraway children and their media talk about news broadcasts of suffering, this study demonstrates that Filipino children from different socio-economic classes have significant differences in their representation and reception of otherness from both Western and non-Western contexts. Using Silverstone's (2006) concept of proper distance, I also argue that children weave in and out of a moral relationship with the Other in their varying expressions of proximity and distance. I demonstrate that an interplay between media contexts and children's socio-economic contexts enables and disables how they describe other children as "too close," "too far," and also of proper distance.

Keywords: media and morality, child audiences, news audiences, suffering, the Other, proper distance, de-Westernizing, media studies, Philippines

MEDIA AND MORALITY

In recent years, media studies have witnessed a dramatic moral-ethical "turn" with the forceful writings of Roger Silverstone (2006), Lilie Chouliaraki (2006), and Nick Couldry (2006), among others. I describe this "turn" as dramatic simply because media and cultural studies have had a historically estranged relationship with the word morality. Scholars from the classical social sciences of sociology and anthropology have long derided our field for being "morally cretinous... facile and useless" (Tester 1994: 3-10). In the few occasions where morality is even uttered, the discourse is either characterized by the screech of "moral panics"—subsequently and rightfully silenced (cf. Drotner 1992)—or the modesty of "moral economy," which later confessed constituted a "discussion of morality with a very small and non-judgmental m" Silverstone (1999: 140).

The new agenda of media and morality, on the other hand, talks about the Other. Capital O, as Silverstone may be likely to remind us. The crucial question being asked is how the media may enable or disable a relationship with the Other based on responsibility, hospitality, and justice. However, much of the recent scholarship relies on textual and phenomenological analyses without actually talking to audiences. Chouliaraki's *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (2006), for instance, examines how Western news media make selective claims as to which peoples are more worthy of attention, compassion and humanitarian action. While some news narratives depict marginalized others with humanity and agency, she cites that a great majority of news clips deny any possibility of viewers feeling any sort of compassion towards the sufferers that they see onscreen. Chouliaraki's textual analysis must be credited for its rigorous exploration and explication of concepts raised in the media and morality debates. But at the same time, these debates can be enriched by empirical audience studies work. Reception research enables us to investigate how audiences make sense of images of otherness in the media by going directly to audiences, and not by speculating from visual or textual analyses.

In this light, this study empirically examines how children relate with distant others in the context of mediation, specifically, through the mediation forded by the narrative of news. From a reception study, it asks how children express perceptions of otherness in relation to distant suffering children that they encounter in global and local television news. And from a drawing exercise, this study explores children's knowledge about suffering others:

how they imagine the problems of children are – whether nearby or in other parts of the globe, and how they learn about them – whether from classroom lectures, family talk, or their active engagement with various kinds of media available to them.

Actual studies of audiences of distant suffering have been few and far between. Cohen and Seu's (2002) study looks at how adults in the United Kingdom engage with humanitarian print advertisements. Problematizing the old compassion fatigue thesis (Moeller 1999; Sontag 2003), which assumes that audiences become passive and desensitized to the repetitive shuffle of suffering and disaster, they expose that individuals have a wide and complex range of emotional responses when confronted with appeals to "do something" about human rights atrocities. They also show how individuals find lines of connections to distant others through religion, ethnicity, and gender. Hoijer's (2004) analysis of Swedish and Norwegian audiences' responses to mediated suffering also discovers various ways by which individuals express compassion for distant others. Furthermore, she argues that compassion is dependent on "ideal victim images" and is expressed differently by male and female audiences – pointing us to the dialectic of media contexts and personal contexts as simultaneously enabling and disabling in the expression of moral responsibility.

CHILDREN AND MORALITY

There have been few recent studies about children's responses to news images of atrocities and disaster, specifically concerning coverage of war. For example, the compilation *Children and Media in Times of War and Conflict* (2007) brings together research about children in the US, UK, Germany, Israel, and The Netherlands as media audiences of the 2003 Iraq War. Using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods, including a drawing exercise similar to the one used in this project, the researchers highlight the interplay of children's media contexts and everyday life contexts in their understanding of atrocities abroad. A significant finding is that children's talk about the war reflects the larger public discourses available in their society (Lemish and Gotz 2007: 7). In Seiter's (2007) study of American children, she discovered that her respondents initially perceived the war as an individualized struggle between George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein. But this simplistic 'hero versus villain' retelling of the Iraq War was actually a function not of their young age or development stage, as Seiter elegantly argues. Rather, it was heavily influenced by the media publications that the

children had been required to read in school. The media available to children at that time were supportive of the war, loyal to Bush, and grossly unflattering to Hussein. Further, the "protective silence" that the parents and teachers of the children interviewed contributed to misinformation on the part of the children. When follow-up interviews were conducted about a year later, Seiter discovered that the children actually offered more critical and nuanced readings of the Iraq War and its media coverage. Seiter posits then that greater visibility of antiwar positions in the national media may have contributed to this shift in opinion as well as local efforts from a school teacher who had devoted more classroom discussion time about the war and its media coverage. Seiter's work also intersects with Hoijer's findings of gendered expressions of compassion above. In the drawings children made of the Iraq War, girls are more likely to illustrate human victims/sufferers than boys, who focus on weapons and technologies of war.

The studies in this volume offer a nuanced understanding of children as a heterogeneous audience of active meaning-makers who draw from their life histories, family values, school lessons, and media content in learning about the world and its many others. In my examination of children's representation and reception of otherness in the news, I turn to Cultural Studies for a more nuanced framework of mediation, which acknowledges how global (media) and local (contexts) are dialectically intertwined (Buckingham 1996, 2000; Lemish 2007). This perspective is concerned with how children make meanings about what they watch, how they express emotions towards who they watch, and how they talk about themselves and others in the context of media consumption. Adopting Buckingham's (1996) approach to studying child talk, which asserts that "In discussing what we watch, and in making claims about what we like and dislike, we are making claims about ourselves – who we are, or indeed who we like to be" (p. 57), we consider children as not deficient but different from adults and that they themselves actively draw upon different meanings and frameworks of interpretation from their diverse social contexts.

As regards the media, this perspective acknowledges that media technologies and media representations are not determining but instead enabling/disabling (Silverstone 2006). As Chouliaraki (2006) asserts, news narratives on suffering either invite pity or dismissal from viewers based on their mode of address: "dots-on-the-map news," for example, reduces suffering others to simplistic icons and numbers that are disabling for audiences' identification. Moeller, in her (2002) study of how children are represented

in international news, argues that kids are in danger of being commodified, as images of the proverbial "starving innocent child" are routinely deployed to "shape the public's desires, claim a moral posture, galvanize donors, and capture the attention of an audience" (p. 53). And in the Philippines, Khan (2006) discovers that children have two common faces in the news: "victims of abuse" (and therefore sympathetic) or "in conflict with the law" (unsympathetic). Indeed, it is interesting to explore children's responses to these images and whether they may develop "critical readings" towards them, or whether these actually evoke pity or even action.

Children, in this study, are individuals between 9 and 12 years of age – an age group recognized by Buckingham (1996) as understudied by scholars on children. By focusing on pre-adolescents, this research project is then able to probe the period wherein people learn how to talk about themselves in relation with others and posit how this talk may or may not challenge adult discourses of "us and them."

FILIPINO CHILDREN AND THE MEDIA

By listening specifically to what Filipino children have to say about distant suffering, we give voice to children in a non-Western context – a group that finds themselves routinely represented as the Other by news media (Moeller 2002). While dialogues with child audiences in Western countries have been carried out in exploring how Western children perceive the "usual suspects others" of the global South (Heintz-Knowles 1992), there is a significant need to reverse the angle of spectator-/scholar-ship. This project then examines how children in a developing country such as the Philippines perceive their others, who they are, who they consider "better" or "more worthy" others, and how they develop feelings of trust, care, and fear from watching the news. The movement to de-Westernize media studies and children's studies, recognize, opens us up not only to surprising answers that our fields have long been searching for, but crucially, to surprising questions that we probably would never have considered asking ourselves in the first place.

With 49 percent of the population below 19 years of age, the Philippines today is deeply concerned about the fate of their children. Commentators from the government, the church, and the academe routinely express their anxieties about the changing structure of the household as well as the media's impact on children's learning and development. Consequently, this discourse of moral panics tends to underpin academic research, as Lanuza (2003) argues

that studies on Philippine youth tend to be moralistic and emotional and directed for political or religious ends.

Television ratings data reveal that Filipino children are high consumers of the news. Unlike in some parts of Asia (Tudor-Locke et al. 2007)—where viewership of news among children is dwindling— in the Philippines, children are avid viewers of national news programs *24 Oras* and *TV Patrol,* which are among the top 10 overall programs for children 2 to 12 years old (AGB Nielsen Phils. 2006). While this trend in viewership can be partly explained by the fact that most TV households in the Philippines only have one TV set and TV viewing then becomes a communal exercise for the whole family, it is still curious that middle- to upper-class children who have access to more than one TV set likewise have national news programs in their top 10 most watched shows (ibid.). It is highly significant then to identify how children copy or challenge parents' talk about distant suffering in the news.

Access to global news channels such as CNN and BBC has been made possible with the diffusion of cable TV. Since the 1993 launch of SkyCable, broadcasts of these channels have reached two-thirds of Philippine households (Philippine Media Landscape 2003). This figure, however, is disputed to be too modest an estimate because of the widespread phenomenon of "tapping," where one household illegally plugs into the cable broadcast of their neighbors (ibid.).

Another factor to consider would be recent trends in reporting about global events. Because of the increased flow of migration in recent years, news about Filipinos abroad have increased in both television and print media. As 11 percent of the population live abroad, there is great concern about the status of Filipinos in other parts of the world. As such, news about September 11, the civil war in Lebanon, the war on Iraq, and others, captivated the headlines for significant periods, as frequent updates on Filipino migrants "caught in the middle" of conflict are given. Indeed, it would be interesting to examine how the narrative of these news items—which I observe to employ a "communitarian discourse" (cf Chouliaraki 2006) of inviting compassion for fellow Filipinos only ("people like us") and not for the peoples actually involved in the conflict—begin to frame children's sense of which Other is "more worthy" of compassion.

PROPER DISTANCE

The key analytical tool that I use in examining children's representations and reception of otherness is the idea of proper distance. Inspired by

Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt, Silverstone (2006) describes proper distance as

> "the importance of understanding the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding" (p. 47).

In his book *Media and Morality*, Silverstone places the ethic of proper distance at the heart of cosmopolitan citizenship. Respect and hospitality for the Other, he argues, is the central moral challenge that individuals face in a world characterized by complex connectivity on one hand and increased polarization on the other. The Other, he argues, must be viewed as both "same as us" and "different from us," and following this, it is then the challenge of global media to represent the Other as "both close and far," what he calls *proper distance*.

Silverstone uses this concept to critique current media representations of the Other as either too close (celebrities in tabloids, exotic Asians, etc.) or too far (terrorists, Muslims, etc.) (p. 48). Drawing the Other in too close is to annihilate their difference by subsuming the Other to the Self, while to cast the Other as too far is to deny the shared humanity of Self and Other. Though Silverstone does not give any specific examples of media representations that follow the ethic of proper distance, we see his influence in Chouliaraki's (2006) critique of news narratives of suffering, which explicates Silverstone's ideas through a rigorous textual analysis. In her book, Chouliaraki develops a typology based of news broadcasts of suffering based on the different moral claims that they make. Adventure news casts the Other as "too far" *(do not help, they are not like you)*, ecstatic news draws the Other in "too close" *(help, they are like you)*, while emergency news preserves the sameness and difference of the Other in relation to the spectator (help, they are like you and not like you) and is thus based on proper distance.

In this study, I use this same concept as a tool to analyze Filipino children's media talk about suffering others. I examine whether their talk subsumes the suffering Other and denies their difference (*too close*), sees them as beyond care and identification and asserts irreconcilable difference (*too far*), or perhaps have some element of both (*both close and far*). Proper distance, while a powerful tool to critique representations, must also be applied bottom-up in order to see how audiences develop relationships that recognize the Other

as both different and similar to us, and how might the media enable or disable these relationships. Further, by applying proper distance to study child audiences, I aim to tie up the "adult" philosophical debates on cosmopolitanism and the media with bottom-up explorations of how children—perhaps the most unpredictable, creative and even active of all audiences—understand their "others." How might cosmopolitanism be enabled/disabled by the media and by personal contexts? What are the linkages between cosmopolitanism and media literacy as moral projects? These are some of the underpinning questions behind this media and morality audience study.

METHODOLOGY

As this is an exploratory study, I chose to have a purposive sample of children, 9 to 12 years old, male and female, from different socio-economic backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, this age range is one of the more frequently neglected subjects of research.

As past studies on children using the focus group interview as the primary method of data gathering have found that greater homogeneity and familiarity within the group foster less guarded, more relaxed dialogue among respondents (Wodak et al. 1999), we thought it best to group the children according to their socio-economic classes. However, for this qualitative study, the grouping does not aim to make any causal links to social class. Following Bourdieu (in Rupp and de Lange 1989), the study merely asserts that different social classes have differential access to forms of knowledge controlled by different social institutions, such as the school and the media.

The key indicators of social class used in selecting the respondents were geographic location and the type of school attended (public or private). Personal contacts were used in sourcing respondents from the municipalities of Fairview (middle-income class) and Santa Mesa (lower-income class). At least one week prior to the interview, parental consent forms that explained the topic of the interview were distributed to the parents of the respondents. The interview for the middle-class group and lower-income class groups took place in December 2006 in classrooms at their schools. Interviews were conducted in Filipino but were translated to English for this paper.

Each focus group lasted roughly 75 minutes. The first part of the focus group was the drawing exercise, where the children were made to create their own representations of other children. This enabled us to see which

resources they were drawing from—school, media, family, etc.—as regards their knowledge of distant suffering. More crucially, we got to see their own expressions of sameness and difference from the creative illustrations that they made. Creative methods such as drawing exercises and even video-recording have been used by Gauntlett (1997) and de Block and Buckingham (2007), who argue that these methods empower children to speak with their own voices. Within the context of the drawing exercise however, instead of using the emotionally loaded term "suffering," we asked the children to draw the "problems" of children in two different parts of the world.

Once everyone had presented their drawings, we asked the children general questions about their news viewing habits and their attitudes towards the news. This provided us with knowledge about their variable levels of interest in the news as well as the contexts of news viewing in each of their households.

The final segment of the focus group entailed showing video clips—from CNN, BBC, and NBC01—to the children to provide further context for their discussion about suffering children in other countries. The video materials were selected from these three international channels, as they are available on Philippine cable television. They were also screened for their relevance to the research topic and their appropriateness to the age group. The clips covered a diverse range of topics: the CNN clip was on homeless children from Hurricane Katrina, the BBC clip showed Iraqi children unable to play outdoors due to the war, and the NBC clip was a case study of a Darfur orphan.

CHILDREN DRAWING CHILDREN

This section discusses the findings from the drawing exercise. Here the children were asked to produce two drawings, as they were asked to draw the problems of children from two different places in the world. They were asked to draw the children's situation and environment, and then explain the drawings to the rest of the group.

Who are the others?

Interestingly enough, all the children decided to draw Filipino children as their first drawings and another from a different nationality for their second drawings, save for one exceptional case who drew a "Filipino" and a "Bicolano" – a child from a province in the Philippines. This respondent claimed that she was unfamiliar with kids' problems elsewhere in the world

but knew of the December 2006 Typhoon Reming that killed more than 400 people in the Bicol region and left many others homeless (Aguilar et al. 2006).

Table 1.1 Middle-class Kids' Drawings of Suffering Children (by place of origin)

Filipino children	8 of 8
African children	5 of 8
Arab children	3 of 8

Table 1.2 Working-class Kids' Drawings of Suffering Children (by place of origin)

Filipino children	7 of 7
Arab children	4 of 7
American children	2 of 7
Bicolano children	1 of 7

In terms of the type of suffering that was represented, it is unremarkable that most of the illustrations of the plight of Filipino children were much more contextual and narrativized as compared to their drawings of kids elsewhere. In spite of this, middle-class children showed no outward signs of having difficulty in drawing and talking about their illustrations of children in other countries. Consider Joshua and his drawing of African children:

Figure 1.1 Joshua's Drawing of Filipino and African Kids

Middle-class

Interviewer: Joshua, tell us about your drawing.

Joshua:This is my drawing: the African and the Filipino. The African, they are the poorest country. They build only their house with trees. They are so poor. They have no technology. They only eat animals. They become pity to other people. No one gives them money. No one loves them. No one likes them. Everyone laughs at them when they go to a new country. They are a really poor people. Someone needs to make money for them. [sic]

Interviewer: Why are they laughed at?

Joshua: Because they look ugly; they don't wear clothes like us. They have no technology.

Mae: [emphatically] They're not pangit [ugly]! They're just dark!

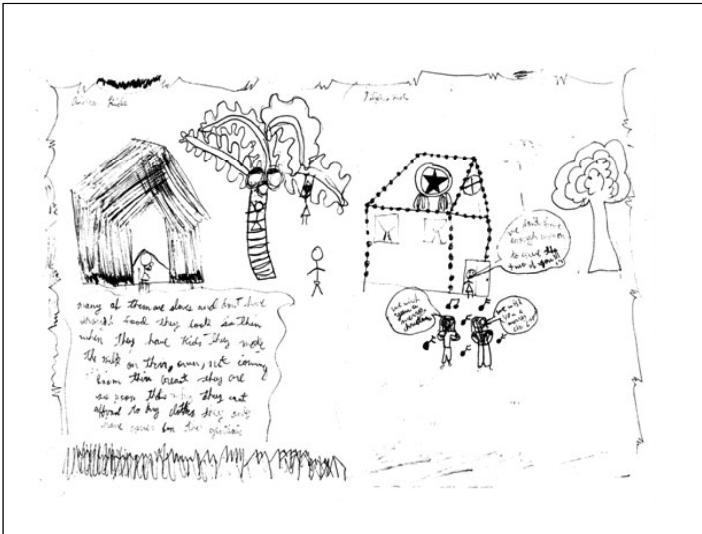
Joshua: Why? Did I say they were pangit?

Mae: Yes, you did! You said ugly!

Though there was strong contestation from Mae in the group, Joshua's conception of Africans as backward "natives" is duplicated in his groupmate Kayeceline's drawing, where we see again depictions of coconut trees and shabby houses and a caption that says, "They can't afford to buy clothes; they only have cover for their genitals." Clearly, this discourse of African barbarianism has long been present in representations in children's schoolbooks and even the news media (Van Dijk 1987).

Among the middle- class children, I also observed that they devoted more time and effort in drawing the plight of foreign others as opposed to Filipino children's problems. While it is too hasty to say that this is indicative of a wider societal "fascination" with the Other, as Silverstone (2006) describes, the more detailed depictions that they have of the suffering of geographically distant others *vis a vis* near others suggest that they do possess symbolic resources of otherness that they can routinely draw from. In fact, reviewing their illustrations on their own (without their accompanying commentary), one can easily make the assumption that the respondents thought that Filipino children are worse off than children in Africa or the Middle East, given that they depicted the African and Middle Eastern settings as more lush and abundant than the barren urban contexts that they situated Filipino children. However, listening to and reading their commentaries, it is evident that they conceived off urban poor children's problems as less extreme than rural poor children's.

Figure 1.2: Kayeceline's Drawing (middle-class group)



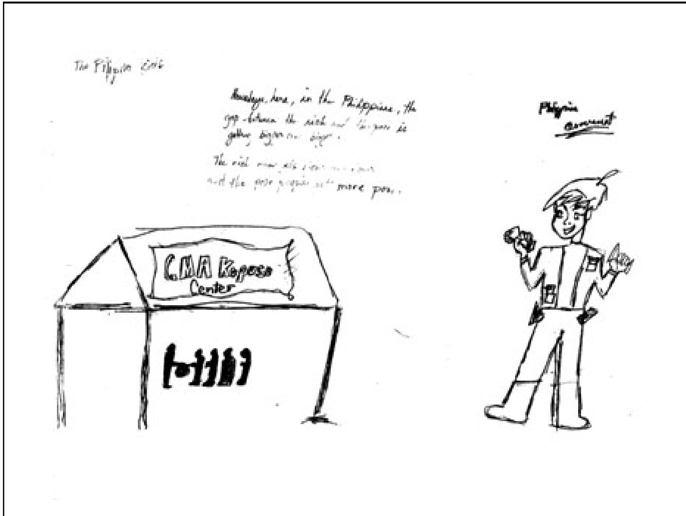
Arab children are similarly represented as backwards in the drawings of middle-class respondents. Twelve year old Rodennel drew an Arab child in a guillotine for 'stealing food' and 9-year old Mae drew a child in the middle of a desert. Using the concept of proper distance, we can say then that middle-class children tend to represent the suffering of faraway children as "too far."

<u>*Middle-class*</u>

> Mae: Because in the desert, you can only get water from cactus and there's very little food. And in the mornings it's hot. Very, very hot. But in the evenings it's just the opposite: it's very, very cold.
>
> Interviewer: So is he lost in the desert?
>
> Mae: Yes. And their houses there are different. A lot of the houses are shabby. Because ...
>
> Joshua: They can't find a place to stay. So they're wandering now.
>
> Mae: No, because their process is different. They don't have much technology. That's why they're just poor.

In contrast to children from other countries, they have much thicker, even intellectualized, descriptions of Filipino children's problems, as they are able to link elites and institutions as causes of poverty.

Figure 1.3 Therese's Drawing



The common discourse of elite corruption in Philippine society, present in news features, history books, even religious sermons (David 2004) is present in children's talk, as for instance Therese (11) asserts, "The gap between the rich and the poor is getting bigger and bigger. Rich men get richer and richer and poor people get poorer. They, like, steal from them. They rob money from the poor."

The drawing exercise reaped widely different responses from the lower-income class children however. When the instructions for the exercise were relayed, we were immediately met with hesitant, questioning glances. To make it easier for the kids then, we tried to give them more directed questions, and the responses that we received were surprising.

Working-class

Interviewer: I guess you have seen children from other countries in the news, right? For instance, African children – what do you know about them?

Kids: [no response]

Interviewer: Like, what do you think? Are they fair-skinned or dark-skinned?

Ton: They're white. They're white.

As opposed to the middle-class children who highlighted the differences between Filipino children and children from other countries, their drawings revealed a duplication of problems of kids here and abroad.

Working-class

Rose: This child does not have a family.

Interviewer: Is that Filipino?

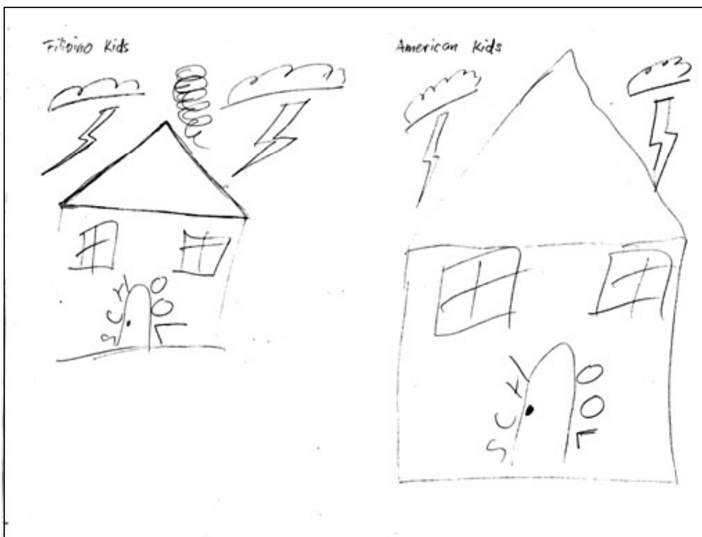
Rose: Yes. Filipino. That's why she's now begging in the streets. Next, the American child, his family died.

Interviewer: Oh okay. So what happened?

Rose: They died when their house burned down. So now he's sick and homeless.

To distant suffering kids, the problems attributed were typhoons, homelessness and the most frequent of all – parents dying. These actually sound like recent headlines of local news media reporting on local issues, as the damage and deathtoll caused by several supertyphoons between October and December 2006 have been heavily documented in local news, even prompting telethons from major TV networks. Consider this illustration by Ton (10):

Figure 2.1 Ton's Drawing



Working-class

Ton: Here, there's a typhoon in the Philippines. Just this month there was a strong typhoon. And school was cancelled.

Interviewer: Oh yes. And then?

Ton: And the American kids . . . the same thing. Typhoon.

Interviewer: Oh. Where did you see this?

Ton: In the news.

Interviewer: Ahh. Was this the hurricane? Hurricane Katrina?

Ton: That might be it. Yes. [tentatively]

Interviewer: The American school is bigger?

Ton: Yes. America has bigger things. They're a richer country.

From the children's hesitant manner of presenting their drawings and the content of the drawings themselves, it is easy to surmise that these children were guessing about the situation of foreign children. But when asked to describe the problems of Filipino children (they also selected Filipinos as one of their two subjects), they were strikingly more verbose in their storytelling.

Working-class

MJ: My classmate's house burned down. And his parents were left inside the house. What happened was they didn't have electricity. So they were tapping on the electricity of their neighbor's house. But the neighbor was selfish so he cut off their connection. So they ended up using candles for light. So one night the mom of my classmate left the candle burning as my classmate went to the store. When he came back the fire was raging badly. And they were unable to stop the fire. I'm so sad for him. He got saved but now he has no parents.

It is also interesting to note that their representations of Filipinos' suffering were more experiential and more emotional, as compared to the middle-class children. In spite of the repeated instructions to share about what they know from the news, they chose to relate stories that happened to someone they know or see regularly. These images tend to be extremely salient to the point that their most frequently mentioned concept of suffering—the loss of parents or family—becomes their (only) yardstick to judge the suffering of others, possibly creating a relationship with others as "too close" (Silverstone 2006).

In summary, here are two tables to illustrate the most common themes that came out from the children's illustrations of other children's problems in the Philippines and elsewhere.

Table 2.1 Filipino Kids Problems Drawn by Respondents

Filipino Kids' Problems	Middle-class	Working-class
1. POVERTY		
* no money	4	3
* victim of social inequality	4	0
* no shelter	3	3
* no education	2	0
* few clothes	1	0
* no parents	0	5
* no food	0	2
2. VICTIM OF NATURAL DISASTER	0	1
3. VICTIM OF PHYSICAL ABUSE	1	0
4. SICK OF TROPICAL DISEASE	0	2

Table 2.2 Distant Kids' Problems Drawn by Respondents

Distant Kids' Problems	Middle-class	Working-class
1. (EXTREME) POVERTY		
• no food (starvation)	4	2
• slavery	2	0
• no parents	4	4
• no school	2	2
• clothes made out of leaves	3	0
• victim of social inequality	2	1
• child labor	0	1
2. SUBJECTS OF PUNISHMENT		
• child criminal tortured / guillotined	2	0
• child punished by parents for speaking to white people	1	0
3. EXTREME CONDITIONS		
• desert environment	2	0
• jungle environment	3	0
4. PHYSICAL APPEARANCE		
• ugly	1	0
• black	0	1
5. VICTIM OF NATURAL DISASTER	1	4
6. VICTIM OF CRIME	0	1
7. SICK OF DISEASE	2	2

It is curious to note that while the type of suffering that the children most commonly depicted can fall under the frame of poverty, the degree of poverty (poverty versus extreme poverty) as well as its causes (i.e., corruption by elite, jungle environment, etc.) are widely different.

Politics of pity

In both socio-economic groups, there is a shared sentiment of being better off, lucky, and even blessed than both suffering children in the Philippines and abroad. Though one may think that the lower-income children may express strong identification with suffering children in the Philippines, they are quick to point out key differences:

> _Working-class_
>
> Rose: My mama tells me, we are lucky. It's a blessing that we have parents, unlike others. The street children, my mama tells me, 'Look at them. They cannot go to school. You do good in school so that you are able to go far.'
>
> Ton: I don't see myself in [a Filipino street child]. Because I know that my parents love me so much. If I want something, they give it to me most of the time.

As the children were asked to go beyond themselves and talk about Filipino children in general, the national identity that they construct also maintains this status as lucky and blessed, in spite of their knowledge of local suffering. When discussing the plight of children elsewhere in the world, lower-income kids point out that such a situation is unlikely to happen in their country.

> _Working-class_
>
> Ton: I see that they suffer more than we do. Because here [in the Philippines], when you don't have any parents anymore, someone else is able to help you and adopt you. There, you're just alone.

Middle-class kids meanwhile articulate that being a financially wealthy country is not a guarantor of happiness, expressing also the discourse of America as a rich, mean world (Lemish 2007: 127). As Michael (12) says, "In America, even though they're a rich country, it doesn't mean that there is no suffering there. There are a lot of kids there that adopt bad vices and start stealing."

Nonetheless, it is interesting to point out that both groups of children tend to express more "the mode of denunciation" (Boltanski 1999: 115), a discourse of compassion that includes an indignant accusation of perpetrators, when talking about Filipino children rather than children overseas. Perhaps we can attribute this to the variety of narratives about distant suffering that they are able to access. As high-rating investigative news reports such as Investigator (*Imbestigador*) and The Probe Team in local media employ adversarial, accusative tones in their coverage of community issues, Filipino children develop knowledge about widespread social inequality through local media. Coverage of international incidents meanwhile tends to focus merely on what happened, following the structure of "adventure news" (Chouliaraki 2006), which decontextualizes suffering.

CHILDREN WATCHING CHILDREN

This section focuses on how children talk about representations of suffering children in the news.

The who and the what of suffering

After viewing the video clips, the children were asked to recall the content of the news items and share what they believe the problems of the children in the news were. Again there are convergences and divergences in the responses between the middle- and lower-income groups.

The middle-class children displayed excellent comprehension of the content of the news material, as they cited specific sound bytes from the news items. However, rather than focus on the children represented in the news, it is interesting to note that they instead retold the situation represented in the news. In other words, the focus was on what the suffering was instead of who the sufferers were. The children were found to talk about the news items as examples of terrorism, poverty, or natural disaster – situations that they acknowledged might happen in the Philippines.

Middle-class

Interviewer: So what was the news item about?

Rodennel: It's like what happens here with the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) and the NPA (New People's Army). The armies attacked and they don't spare any little thing in their way.

. . .

Interviewer: So do you think that you can put yourself ...

Rodennel: In the future, maybe. Because life is hard these days. The common news items feature political trouble and secondly terrorism.

Michael: Yes. Because now there are a lot of terrorists that go to the Philippines that detonate bombs in the malls, hotels, cars. That's why I'm afraid because my family might be there when that happens.

Though they expressed sadness and claimed that they identify with the suffering child in the news, their talk centered around how the child's situation can easily apply to them. They saw how world events have become fluid and interrelated. Instead of strongly identifying with the suffering person mediated by the news, there seemed to be stronger identification with the situation that is represented – a situation that they found too similar to local representations of suffering, too close for comfort. One other possible reason for their reaction may arise from how popular news discourse thematizes news items to fall under headings of crime, terrorism, war, etc., focusing on the news event than on people implicated in the news.

The talk of the lower-income group once again highlighted their earlier perception that problems and suffering in general are not national, cultural, or geopolitical issues but they are first and foremost about the family.

Working-class

Interviewer: So what did you understand about the news clip?

MJ: There's a kid who lost his parents. Somebody died . . .

Rose: His mother. Then his father disappeared.

In viewing another news clip on how Iraqi children are unable to play outdoors due to the war, they responded that the Iraqi children were in fact "lucky."

Working-class

Interviewer: So what do you feel about the children? Do you feel sad that they can't play?

MJ and Ton: Yes

Kaye: No. Not really.

Joy: They're actually lucky.

MJ: Yes, blessed.

JM: Yes, because they were not . . . their parents . . .

Rose: Because their parents were not killed.

Interviewer: So you don't think that they have any problems?

Rose and MJ: No, they don't.

Again, it is striking to notice that they judge the suffering of others based on whether they have a complete family or not, perhaps a discourse of the Other that is "too close." We can surmise that working-class children's limited conception of distant suffering children may be a result of their more limited access to representations of distant others, as their social class background makes it less likely for them to access cable television and the Internet. School curricula, particularly in public schools, have also remained Philippine-centric since 1986, when Filipino culture, language and history were re-emphasized after the martial law period.

In contrast the nearby other for them has a face. MJ recounted how they lent money to (fellow respondent) Ton's family. Joy shared that she gave extra slippers to a poor child that she saw on the street. And Kayeceline narrated how their family took in one street child for a few weeks as they searched for his missing parents.

Power and prayer

It is curious that there seemed to be a duality in positioning that children experienced in relation to the news narratives of distant suffering: one of powerfulness and one of powerlessness.

Just as they did in relation to their representations of distant others, many of the kids self-identified as "lucky" (swerte) in their reception of children in the news. Joshua (10), for instance, cites how he watches the news to remind himself how fortunate he was compared to others: "When I am so tired with doing homework, I just turn on the news. It's good that my problem is as small as this!" This recalls Calhoun's (2004) argument that the asymmetry in the process of mediation always makes the spectator realize how fortunate s/he is. And in this context, young people are reminded that they are luckily "normal" compared to the abnormals normalized by the daily rhythm of bad news.

Curiously, this therapeutic quality to watching suffering is transformed when done in the context of family viewing. Parents were often cited to making them feel guilty when they come across images of starving children in the news. For instance, Joy (9) recalled the time when she was complaining

of having to eat sardines yet again for dinner, then immediately *24 Oras* flashed a story about an emaciated African child. She said that her mother immediately scolded her for being "ungrateful" that she had clothes and shelter unlike the child onscreen. For Kayeceline (11), it became a scare tactic: "Because before I used to always go out and hang out . . . So my papa tells me, 'You should watch the news. Look at the children! Look at what can happen to you!' So starting 5th Grade, I rarely go out because I got afraid." However ashamed, scared, or unapologetic they may feel afterwards, watching news about suffering nonetheless interpellates viewers, even child viewers, into a position of power.

However, in spite of occupying a position of dominance, they are simultaneously confronted with the impossibility of action. Powerlessness was most often expressed as an inability to do immediate and concrete to help the suffering children onscreen due to issues of age, geography, and educational and financial status.

Working-class

Ton: What can I do for Thomas? I guess nothing, really . . . Nothing I can do right now because I'm too young and I have no money . . . Who's going to listen to me?

MJ: I agree. I can't help Thomas. But then when I see a street kid, I can give my [lunch] to him. That way, he can forget about his problems. . . . .

Middle-class

Amirabelle: Maybe once I graduate I can help the poor. But for a kid in Iraq on TV, I can't do much really.

Rodennel: Yes, I plan to build a public school for [street] children too.

Interviewer: But what about now?

Rodennel: No. When we watch and I say I want to help, my parents just say I can help by studying hard and doing well in school.

Additionally, some respondents also expressed distrust over humanitarian aid, claiming that those who donate goods cannot be certain "whether the food or money will reach Africa" because "that's too far from here," as Mae (9) said. This curiously agrees with Cohen and Seu's (2002) study of adults' perceptions towards humanitarian groups, pointing to how adult cynicism can trickle down to children. This was most evident in the occasion when

Miguel (12) felt "bad" when his mom denied his request to donate in a local telethon for victims of a typhoon because "you don't know where the money is going" and that it was better to help in the school charity instead.

Reconciling their feelings of being privileged on the one hand and being unable to act on the other, children highlight prayer as a common response to representations of distant suffering. As Catholics (only one of 15 respondents is non-Catholic), the respondents view prayer as a legitimate action and a concrete act of compassion. And although they cite donations or volunteering in school charities as possible ways of acting for other children, the geographic distance between them and foreign children is seen as too great, as well as their own inability to make any substantial change.

> *Middle-class*
>
> Miguel: What I do is pray. After all we're all the same in the eyes of God. I leave it up to Him to take care of children elsewhere.
>
> Amirabelle: I don't feel like I can do anything right now. Maybe when I'm older and I have a job I can donate to them. But I can pray for them now.
>
> Michael: I can do good with my studies now. My parents tell me to do good with my studies so I won't be like them.
>
> . . .
>
> *Working-class*
>
> Interviewer: How do you think you are able to help when you pray?
>
> Rose: We help when we pray too because God listens to my prayers. That's why we should just pray. God loves all kinds of people.

Though the children have varying conceptions of distant others—middle-class children view them from stereotyped lenses as different and primitive while the working-class group have even more limited awareness of them and apply their extensive knowledge of local suffering in perceiving other children's problems—there is a shared understanding that other children are not too dissimilar from them. They cite that other children, however distant they may be, are cared for by their families, their parents, and God.

LISTENING TO CHILDREN'S VOICES

Children's voices often sound like whispers amidst the noise and chaos of the wider world. And as we scholars continue our adult debates about

media, morality, and otherness, perhaps it is fruitful to take a humble step back and listen to what children have to say.

Curiously, I find in this study that Filipino children do engage with the issue of global suffering. Though some may have stereotypical ideas about suffering elsewhere (such as most middle-class children) or have more intimate experience of suffering nearby (such as most working-class children), suffering is part and parcel of their everyday experience. It is nearby and faraway, mediated and immediate, eventful and at the same time banal. Their symbolic resources, as we gleaned from the drawing exercise, are varied and plenty: parents' diatribes, religious sermons, school encyclopedia, and of course news media. Ignorance therefore is not the issue.

Neither is compassion fatigue. As we examined from their reception of the news about suffering, children speak in many voices about how they deal with images of distant suffering. Some are utilitarian, actively seeking out images just to remind them how lucky they are. Some are worriers, not about the suffering children that they see onscreen, but about the possibility that events there are likely to happen here. Some are combative, pointing fingers at society's powerful elite for being selfish and corrupt. The media, rather than leaving them exhausted or distraught, at the end of each story, position them in a place of power, where they can at least see how much better things are here at home with one's (complete) family.

But after the talk, what of action? Children, often perceived as innocent and incapable, find themselves wanting to act but are helpless to act. Helpless not (simply) because they're young, but really because of grown-ups who say that there is nothing, nothing that could be done. Grown-up narratives in the media and on the edge of it—in everyday talk—seem to reinforce among children the despair of distance, specifically, the pointlessness and impossibility of action-at-a-distance. Indeed, signs of distrust over humanitarian organizations and communitarian attitudes to help nearby others as opposed to faraway others in children seem to be perceptions that they have come to acquire from exposure to media representations and, perhaps more directly, from parents' media talk in the heart of home. So while the media at certain occasions do expand our moral conscience in presenting atrocities from outside our immediate spheres, the quality of the representation—whether they offer or not points of identification for the spectator—and its intersection with everyday talk—whether parents encourage or not identification with the sufferer—constitute a circuit of compassion by which individuals are enabled or disabled to feel responsibility for distant others.

And here, the notion of proper distance proves essential. As we see in children's talk, they weave in and out of a moral relationship with the Other depending on context. Initially, we saw that the middle-class kids see the Other as too far – too native, too poor, too distant. And lower-income kids practically had no concept of the distant Other. But the discourses of family and religion, salient in their talk, played a significant role in their identification with the distant Other. As strange as foreign children may be for them, Filipino children recognize that they are like them too – cared for by parents and looked after by God. Clearly, it is not purely media discourse that enables or disables the sense of identification with the Other; it is in the coming together of the text and the reader's unique, context-dependent frameworks where the seed of compassion is born.

Future research should delve into how in fact this seed may be further cultivated. A transnational study, for instance, would be extremely helpful to compare how different contexts play a role in how children perceive suffering. Seeing how their Catholic beliefs provided Filipino children with a way of speaking about the Other based on proper distance, it would be interesting to discover other ways in which proper distance is manifest. Also, other studies can further examine how different narrative techniques in news reports may affect children's responses towards suffering others.

Finally, the study's findings suggest a strong codependence between cosmopolitanism and media literacy as a moral project. Cosmopolitanism, as both awareness of otherness and an ethical practice, depends much on the moral status of voice and visibility in the media. As children first get to see the faces and hear the voices of other cultures through their mediations, it is significant that children have access to a wide variety of images and sounds of/by the Other that stress their shared similarities as well as differences.

Further, by giving children platforms—whether in school, home, or youth-specific media—to talk about issues such as global suffering, we equip young citizens with an early awareness of the complex moral dilemmas raised by mediation and globalization. As we have seen here, childrearing philosophy premised on 'protective silence' (Seiter 2007) or communitarian politics (cf Chouliaraki 2006) do little in providing children skill and imagination in engaging with the Other.

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