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'Like it, don't like it, you have to like it': children's emotional responses to the absence of transnational migrant parents in Lombok, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the experiences and emotions of children in rural East Lombok, Indonesia, who stay behind with relatives or neighbours while their parents leave the country for work. The article contributes to recent scholarship of children's experiences of transnational migration in Southeast Asia by drawing out the complex emotions of children who stay behind. Based on research conducted in four 'sending' villages, the article describes children's lived experiences of their parent's transnational migration, and their intense feelings that whether they 'like it or don't like it', they have no choice but to acquiesce to their parents' long, often indeterminate absences. The research suggests that stay-behind children are entangled in community anxieties pervading the emotional economy of transnational migration, including the embodied emotion of shame (*malu*) which shapes children's responses to parental absence. By focusing on children's own views and experiences, we contribute to growing debates about the implications of migration for children's rights and well-being in Southeast Asia.

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In contemporary Indonesia, strategies for economic development have led to a rise in transnational migration and a surge in family fragmentation. Despite increasing geographical mobility, sustained experiences of immobility remain the norm, particularly for the children of migrant parents who stay behind in their home communities. Children waiting for an indeterminate period of time for their migrant parents to return, often living with alternative caregivers for years, has become a necessary and accepted fact of life in many communities.

This article contributes to debates about the impact of transnational migration on children who stay behind. Raising questions about generalisations regarding children's circumstances and emotions in current scholarship on migrant families, the article also contributes to recent discussions of children's emotional geographies, particularly in majority world contexts (Blazek and Kraftl 2015). The nuances of children's emotional lives are examined by drawing on a study conducted from 2014 to 2016 on patterns of birth registration among low-skilled and undocumented transnational migrant families in four low-income villages in rural East Lombok, Indonesia (Ball, Butt, and Beazley 2017).

Within children's geographies and migration studies there is a critical need for more emotionally attuned research in the majority world. In particular, children's emotions are rarely considered in scholarship on transnational migration, and are absent in policy formation in Indonesia (SMERU Research Institute 2014). Children of migrants have consistently been portrayed as passive and

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compliant, lacking agency in the decision-making process that leads to their parents' migration (Dobson 2009). However, emerging research with children about their experiences of migration explores children as active agents in transnational migration (Punch 2012; Lam, Hoang, and Yeoh 2013; Beazley 2015; Hoang et al. 2015). This shift of perspective includes an investigation of children's emotional responses to the experience of remaining behind from children's own perspective (Parrenas 2005; Coe et al. 2011; Madianou and Miller 2011; Hoang et al. 2015). Despite Indonesia's high and increasing rates of out-migration, relatively little is known about Indonesian children's emotional responses to being separated from parents who have migrated overseas for work (Graham et al. 2012; Lam, Hoang, and Yeoh 2013). There is also a dearth of understanding about children's involvement in their parents' decisions to migrate (Moskal and Tyrell 2016, 454). Elsewhere, however, scholars have begun to focus on children's limited power in shaping parental decision-making in transnational migration (Dreby 2007; Coe et al. 2011).

In this article, we first summarise the Indonesian government's position on transnational migration, before providing a brief overview of the literature related to stay-behind children in the region and recent scholarship on emotional geographies in transnational lives. Based on our qualitative research, we then describe the lived experiences of stay-behind children in East Lombok. The findings yield insights into community perceptions and expectations around children of migrants, and children's perceptions and emotional responses to their parents' decision to migrate. We explore how children are enmeshed in community apprehensions surrounding the emotional economy of transnational migration, specifically within the embodied emotion of *malu*, or shame, a collectively shared and socialised emotion in Indonesia (Lindquist 2004; Röttger-Rössler et al. 2013; Graham Davies 2015). Highlighting the importance of local social and cultural conditions shaping children's circumstances, we argue for the inclusion of children's views in policy formation and child protection strategies to ensure policies are implemented in the best interests of the child. We also reflect on how our own emotional responses and 'states of being' in the field influence our understandings of stay-behind children's lives (Davies and Spencer 2010, 1). For the purposes of this research, the group we refer to as 'children' and 'young people' are between the ages of 12 and 17 years old.

Transnational migration from Indonesia

The lives of children in Indonesia are significantly shaped by rapidly growing transnational labour migration. In the past two decades, the numbers of Indonesian workers migrating has risen sharply (World Bank 2015). Approximately 700,000 documented migrants left Indonesia in 2012, the majority of whom went to work on plantations or factories in Malaysia, or as construction workers or maids in the Middle East (ILO 2013). Many secured false birth certificates and travel documents to complete the journey through official channels (Ball, Butt, and Beazley 2017). It is widely accepted, however, that despite government efforts to secure borders and promote authorised migration, undocumented labour migration out of Indonesia, conducted without legal work visas, is between two and four times official figures (ILO 2013).

Prior to the 1970s, overseas migrants were mostly men, usually working in palm oil plantations in Malaysia. Increasingly, there is a feminisation of transnational migration, and women now make up 76% of Indonesia's overseas migrants, working as domestic servants in Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong or Singapore, or in factories in Malaysia (Andreveski and Lyneham 2014). Typically, a husband and wife work in separate countries; the husband in Malaysia and the wife in Saudi Arabia. For undocumented migrants living in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, the physical distance, expense, legal obstacles and risks involved in travelling back home is a major determinant of migrants having limited contact with their families (Zentgraf and Stoltz Chinchilla 2012).

The Indonesian government promotes and facilitates overseas migration to reduce its unemployment numbers, officially seven million, and to encourage foreign remittances (World Bank 2015). Indonesia is the third highest remittance-receiving country in Southeast Asia, and remittances

sent by its six million transnational migrants comprise 1% of the country's GDP (World Bank 2017). Indonesian women are particularly encouraged to migrate. Demonstrating their commitment by sending home remittances to pay for children's education and improve living conditions in their communities, they are extolled as 'heroes of development' (Chan 2014). Systematic enculturation of overseas migration in policy has resulted in a culture of migration, where low-income families promote overseas migration as desirable and young people aspire to migrate as soon as they are old enough to do so (Beazley 2015). In this way, Indonesian government and family values converge, creating strong pressure for mothers and fathers to work overseas to improve the lives of their families.

A consequence of these migration trends is that approximately one million children stay behind in Indonesia while one or both parents migrate (SMERU Research Institute 2014). Implied within the Indonesian government's pro-migration stance is that home communities assume responsibility for the care of migrant parents' children (SMERU 2014, 53; Butt, Ball, and Beazley 2017). Within the communities themselves, older siblings, grandparents and other extended family members are expected to care for these children, often for years at a time, evoking established Indonesian and wider traditions of fostering by grandparents and other family members, where the costs and benefits of childbearing are distributed across extended family.

Studies in other locations have examined the economic impact of transnational migration on children's lives. Studies argue that material benefits accruing from remittances from migrant parents yields a net positive impact on families, with stay-behind children experiencing an improved quality of life (McKay 2007; Lam, Hoang, and Yeoh 2013). Within this literature, children of migrant parents are often depicted as emotionally resilient, and that they are well looked after or even better off when cared for by others (McKay 2007; Coe et al. 2011). These constructions of children's experiences are challenged by accumulating research examining the social and personal lives of stay-behind children. Risks associated with out-migration in low-income families and single parent or no-parent households include high rates of infant mortality, domestic violence, early school leaving, child neglect, child abandonment and increased risk-taking behaviour (Graham and Jordan 2011; Graham et al. 2012; Allerton 2014; SMERU Research Institute 2014). A recent study revealed that Indonesian children staying behind when their mothers migrated were more likely to be neglected in terms of physical and mental health and access to education (SMERU Research Institute 2014). Behaviour problems are also more likely to be reported about children of migrant mothers, or when both parents are overseas (Graham and Jordan 2011, 769).

These findings call into question simplifications of children's emotions as easily shaped by the economic well-being which remittances sometimes produce. Our discussion takes up the challenge posed by Dobson (2009, 356) who repudiates arguments that cast children as 'objects' and 'non-persons lacking both feelings and agency of their own'. We explore children's own perceptions of their lives to illustrate why children's emotions need to figure more prominently in explanations about the impact of transnational migration.

Emotional geographies in transnational lives

Our research makes an important contribution to recent scholarship on emotional geographies in transnational lives. The current 'turn to emotions and affect' within geography has shed light on children's emotional geographies and the place of children's emotions in policy formation (Kraftl 2013; Blazek and Kraftl 2015). Within migration studies, recent scholarship examines how parental migration results in socio-emotional challenges for children, including a 'care crisis' and the future of the family in sending communities such as the Philippines (Parrenas 2005). The emotional responses of stay-behind children of migrant mothers may include anger, longing, confusion, resentment and feelings of abandonment (Graham et al. 2012; SMERU Research Institute 2014). Parrenas (2005) and Madianou and Miller (2011) acknowledge the scope of Filipino stay-behind children's suffering, including emotional distress and poor social networks. Stay-behind children of migrant

parents are reported to have 'higher incidence of mental disorders, lower levels of school performance and impeded social and psychological development' (Whitehead and Hashim 2005, 14). Other studies have found that a mother's migration impacts more on the emotional well-being of a child than when a father migrates (Graham et al. 2012).

McKay (2007) challenges Parrenas' (2005) conclusion that migration of Filipino mothers generates emotional distance and neglect for children who stay behind, as the children in the community where she conducted her research were found to be well cared for and better off emotionally as a result of their parents' decision to migrate. Yet as McKay (2007) points out, conditions are not the same in all sending communities or even within one country such as the Philippines. If migrant workers and their communities are more exposed to vulnerabilities, then family or community members providing care for stay-behind children may have limited resources to ensure a child's survival, wellness and protection. This is particularly the case in poor regions of Indonesia where parents are more likely to be unskilled, and sometimes undocumented, migrant workers. Explorations of children's lived experiences in these specific social contexts can deepen understanding of children's social and emotional practices and competencies, and their feelings of living at the margins of family and community (Stodulka and Rottger-Rossler 2014).

Strong cultural values shape children's affective experiences in the specific social, cultural, economic and political landscape of East Lombok, with parents typically playing powerful roles in shaping children's behaviour. Traditionally in Indonesia, most adults assume children want what their parents want and that they will obey and respect parents and elders, including older siblings (Röttger-Rössler et al. 2013). One important expression of this respect associated with norm-complaint behaviour, is learning and embodying shame or embarrassment, *malu*, which is a central child rearing concept in Indonesia (Röttger-Rössler et al. 2013). Fuller Collins and Baha (2000) explain that while the emotion of shame is a universal human experience, nuances of shame are shaped by culture; shame is an internalised representation of cultural demands on an individual, associated with external control through a fear of abandonment or exile.

In their comprehensive analysis of shame (*malu*) in Indonesian families, Röttger-Rössler et al. (2013) describe how socialising emotions enable children to adjust their behaviour and emotions to the normative prescriptions of their culture. They explain *malu* as collectively shared and socialised to discourage individualism and support social harmony and deference in the community. The emotion *malu* manifests as modest and respectful behaviour towards others, especially elders, triggering feelings of shame when social norms or family expectations are transgressed.

> Knowing *malu* involves a child learning that his or her identity is bound to that of others, especially family members, because *malu* may be evoked by the actions of a close relative … The pain associated with shaming one's family can be extreme. (Röttger-Rössler et al.2013, 11)

Social control embodied in *malu* is reinforced in various ways, including doing something that may cause shame such as wearing inappropriate clothes, or humiliating someone, particularly a relative, through one's behaviour. In this way *malu* reinforces cultural prescriptions of acceptable behaviour, which include gendered differences in expressions of shame (Lindquist 2004). Within the socialising context, children are expected to control intense negative emotions including feelings of anger. The systematic shaming of childhood emotional outbursts helps children gradually learn to suppress anger and other emotional expressions in order to avoid the unpleasant feeling of shame. Hence, *malu* facilitates a general suppression of negative emotions and is inseparably linked with harmonious social relations. It is a collective emotion reflecting power relations within the community and clearly indicates children's place in the social hierarchy (Lyon 1995).

Emotions of shame are not limited to local child rearing relations; they are intensely embodied by migrant adults, and drive many of the emotional experiences of migration. Discussing female migrants working in Batam, Indonesia, Lindquist (2004, 503) describes *malu* as

> a crucial starting point for analyzing the tensions surrounding the moral economy of *merantau*.[1] … *malu* becomes the emotion that links the expectations of home with experiences of migration.

Feelings of *malu* among transnational migrants in Indonesia can critically impact stay-behind children as part of wider 'anxieties that emerge in the shadows of the Indonesian project of development' (Lindquist 2004, 504). Our study suggests that stay-behind children are entangled in pervasive community anxieties surrounding transnational migration, including the embodied emotion of *malu*, and that this shapes children's emotional responses to parental absence.

Method

The research used a child-focused approach that recognises child research participants as active agents, respecting children's opinions throughout the research process, and using appropriate methods through which children can express themselves (Bessell, Beazley, and Waterson 2016). The research was conducted in four rural sending villages in East Lombok, in 2014 and 2016. One objective of the research – part of a larger study on birth registration in rural Lombok (Ball, Butt, and Beazley 2017) – was to explore the lived experiences and emotions of children where one or both parents had migrated for work.

The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 family groups consisting of adult caregivers and their children, and 7 focus groups with young people aged 12–17 years. Interviews were in Indonesian with occasional translations of the local Sasak language. Focus groups were held with groups of young people whose parents had migrated overseas, including adolescent girls, a mix of adolescent girls and boys, and a group of boys. During discussions we asked participants to talk about: (1) their experiences of their parents' migration including the impact it has had on them; (2) coping strategies during the absence of parents; (3) their involvement in their parent's decision to migrate and (4) their aspirations for their future. Participants' accounts were contextualised through observation and informal unstructured interviews with young people in the villages. We also interviewed local government officials, teachers in a primary school and adult caregivers, including grandmothers, aunts and other family members. All research participants were remunerated for their time. The specific sites of this study are not identified by name due to the vulnerability of the children and the sensitivities of some cases discussed. The names of respondents have also been changed to protect their identity.

Research findings

Lombok is an arid and remote island situated in Eastern Indonesian, characterised by high population growth, low wages, low education and employment, food insecurity, falling agricultural productivity, poor communications and poor health including high infant mortality (Ball, Butt, and Beazley 2017). Transnational migration from the island is estimated at 100,000 per year, although high rates of undocumented or 'irregular' migration mean exact figures are unknown (ILO 2013). The district of East Lombok is one of the highest sending areas of transnational migrants in Indonesia, with impoverished conditions motivating an entrenched culture of undocumented migration to Malaysia among Sasak men, and to the Middle East by women (Lindquist 2010; Khoo et al. 2014). The cultural tradition of *merantau* is important in Lombok, and impels overseas migrants to return as a 'success', which includes bringing home gifts, buying a motorbike and building a concrete house, or at least a concrete floor, when one returns. In the villages where we conducted research, almost every household had a family member who had worked or was currently working away to achieve this goal.

Lombok government officials we met underplayed the impact of migration on stay-behind children, saying these children were well cared for by their remaining parent or extended family, and emphasising that parents' remittances ensured children's survival. Our research suggested that benefits of migration to children depended on many intersecting factors, including whether one or both parents had migrated; whether a child had a birth certificate to enrol in school and access welfare supplements; if the parent(s) had migrated through official channels; whether parent(s)

had skilled or low-skilled employment; whether remittances were reliable; whether the family could pay off recruitment debts; how long the parent(s) were away; and whether the parent(s) were able to communicate with their child(ren) during their separation.

Family expectations for migrants to send remittances home are high in East Lombok, including children's expectations of their parents. Money is used for food and to repay money borrowed to finance migration. The disjuncture between the promises and the reality of migration generates acute anxiety for transnational migrants and threatens the possibility of returning home a 'success'. 'Failed migration' and failure to meet family expectations was a consistent fear that adults expressed in our research. Informants recounted how family members were unable to send desired remittances home – many returning home still in debt, feeling marginalised and *malu.* This was especially true for 'irregular' migrants with low-skilled and low-paid positions overseas.

It is with reference to these experiences of success, failure and shame that the experiences of families in migrant communities can be best understood. Consistent with Lindquist's (2004) earlier research findings, families in Lombok revealed how the emotion of *malu* penetrated local perceptions of the failed migration of a family member. If a migrant could not return home with evidence of success, there was an increased chance they would not return home at all. If a migrant had not sent home remittances or not paid their debt the family would feel *malu*, especially if their financial situation is known to other villagers. This manifestation of *malu* within a family is described by Graham Davies (2015) as 'kinships of shame', where feelings of shame extend beyond the actions of a single person to affect the whole family, including children. As one migrant's wife said: 'we feel shy if we meet the person who loaned the money before we pay our debt. We don't feel good when our husband is away and after so many months we have not paid back the debt'.

One family's reported experience exemplifies the power of *malu* in children's lives. In two separate in-depth interviews with a mother, Ramlah, and her young adult son Adi, both vividly describe a pivotal incident involving shame that took place when Adi was young. When Adi was five his father left for work in Malaysia as an undocumented migrant but did not prosper. He was able to send Rp 800,000 (USD 60) in remittances, but all the money was owed to the moneylender who financed the trip. Ramlah had the money in her hand when the lender came to the house to collect it, and she handed it over in front of Adi. Watching his father's money being given away, Adi had a huge emotional outburst. He tried to seize the money from the hands of the lender, and then lay on the living room floor, kicking and screaming in hysterics for a long time. He could not be consoled. Adi's behaviour was viewed by Ramlah as culturally inappropriate and the embarrassment of his emotional crisis stayed with Ramlah for years afterwards. Adi also recalled the event, describing it as a key moment when he internalised a sense of obligation to provide for his family and do better than his father. Over time Adi learned to embody the feeling of *malu*, which includes suppressing anger, and instead channelled his frustration by focusing on migrating overseas as soon as he was old enough, taking on the role of family provider.

Ramlah's and Adi's case also highlights the absence of social services to support families impoverished by failed migration. All villagers stressed the negative effects of out-migration on child rearing and the difficulties of caring for children whose parents were absent. The 'care triangle' involving a foster caregiver, absent parent and stay-behind child, discussed by Graham et al. (2012), only works when all parties are empowered to follow through on commitments. Our observations and interviews indicate that when a parent migrates in the low-income communities where we conducted our research, children living with extended family or neighbours were not always willingly or attentively cared for.

Fractured families compound the challenges of protecting children of migrants where family is the only resource available. In a second case, caregiver Sinta told us how she looked after her sisters' two children while her sister worked in Saudi Arabia, as well as caring for her own three children. Sinta said her sister sent money 'every so often' but 'never enough'. Sinta used the money to pay debts to the agent who arranged her sister's migration, and to pay back money borrowed from neighbours or friends while waiting for the next remittance payment to arrive. The sister telephoned once a

month to speak to her children, but sometimes did not call for a few months: 'Maybe it's because she knows I will ask for money', Sinta laughed ruefully. Sinta also described how she occasionally allowed other children whose parents were overseas to eat and sleep in her house. She said these children did not go to school and usually roamed the forest during the day, looking for food to eat (berries and leaves) and wood to sell as fuel in the village: 'Everyone in the village takes care of these children, we are all the same, in the same position, life is hard for all of us'.

Primary school teachers and village officials confirmed the community's challenges around caring for stay-behind children. However, the teachers and officials also contributed to the stigmatisation of these children (and their migrant parents). Teachers identified several children with both parents away and not attached to any household, who roamed in small gangs. These children were described by the teachers as having been 'neglected' by both parents and caregivers and as running 'wild' in the forest. The teachers said the children faced discrimination and social stigma in the community, including name-calling by other children. Other adults, including village officials, openly talked about the parents of stay-behind children in front of the children, and how they never sent money home. As a result of the public shaming and stigmatisation some children decided to leave the village to eke out a living in the provincial capital or elsewhere. The fact that stay-behind children exercise their agency in this way demonstrates that they are not passive victims of their circumstances and some are able to find alternative survival strategies.

Teachers also confirmed the absence of the mother, or both parents, as being disruptive for the child, citing lower school grades and poor social adjustment. One teacher said, 'It's easy to distinguish when both parents have left by their [children's] attitude in class'. They identified at least 14 children among the 100 attending their school with specific psychological symptoms, which in their opinion indicated they were emotionally 'disturbed' due to prolonged parental absence. Symptoms included poor self-regulation, being 'sluggish' and less attentive, and very high non-attendance rates. These children were described as socially isolated 'daydreamers' who failed to engage with other children at play time. Further emotional responses to their circumstances included high volatility and acting out by suddenly crying or shouting out in class. One boy, aged nine, started screaming in class for no apparent reason. When asked why he was screaming, he replied, 'I miss my mother and I want to see her'. The teachers reported that these children were more likely to drop out of school. Girls whose mother or both parents were overseas often dropped out of school before the end of primary school (aged 11) to care for their younger siblings, and boys dropped out to seek work to bring money home for the family.

Children's perceptions

Children who participated in our study described a mix of emotions resulting from prolonged separations from parents. Negative emotions were described more often by children whose mother or both parents were overseas, although these children reported more positive experiences if their parents sent regular remittances home. Almost all children participating in our research said friends, siblings, grandparents, neighbours and extended families offered them assistance and emotional support while their parents were away.

Most of the girls who participated knew their parents were overseas to pay for their schooling and improve their lives. They were happy to go to school and had intense feelings of obligation and 'duty' to work hard and recite the Quran to make their parents happy. Boys also had feelings of obligation to their absent parents and reported feeling pressure to earn an income while their parents were away. This sense of responsibility for both boys and girls resulted in feelings of *malu* when expectations were not met. One adolescent boy without a job said: 'I feel *malu* because I can't make them happy yet'. These emotions have been described elsewhere as a rhetoric of sacrifice, where children learn to adapt to the accepted discourse of the family working together on the migration project (Hoang et al. 2015). However, other children – especially boys – described feeling '*malas*' (unmotivated) to go to school because of their parent's absence.

Feelings of *malu* were frequently mentioned during discussions. Children explained they felt *malu* if they did not have nice things or new clothes to wear like their friends, because their parents had not sent any money. One child felt *malu* and let down by his parents' lack of success, saying in a disappointed voice: 'They went away for two years when I was very small. When they came back they didn't build a house and they brought only clothes. Only that'. Another said: 'When my father came home he didn't build a house. The money was not enough. So he went back. He still didn't get enough money' (Emir 16).

Two adolescent brothers said they were *malu* because they did not receive any money or gifts from their parents who were both overseas. The young men suggested feeling emotional distance from their absent parents, saying they felt much closer to their grandmother and aunt with whom they lived. Both parents had returned and had remarried with locals in the village, but the boys do not visit their parents' new households. The boys' aunt explained that the boys were *malu* because their mother had remarried. The boys agreed with her and said they also felt *malu* because they were not included in either parents' new families.

One girl, Mutiara, in contrast, expressed pleasure with her new blended family that resulted from migration. Her father went to Malaysia when she was two months old and sent no money or news. Her mother went to work in a restaurant in Bali, but returned and eventually remarried when Mutiara was five years old. When her father finally returned, 12 years later, he remarried another woman in the village.

> I was happy to see my father. It was the first time for me to see his face as I had not seen him at all when I was small. My step father looked after me and sent me to school. I feel that my step father is my real father. But I also call my real father 'Dad' and so I have two fathers! And I also have two mothers! I have a good relationship with my step mother and I often visit them. But I am happier here with my real mother and step father. (Mutiara, age 14)

Mutiara said she did not want to migrate away from her family; she wanted to stay in school and become a teacher to make her parents happy. However, many young people we spoke with articulated their aspiration to migrate overseas as soon as they could. This was despite the numerous stories of exploitation and failed migration: 'There are many bad stories from overseas but we keep going because we need the money – more money than we can make here' (Fitri, age 17).

A group of adolescent boys explained it was necessary to migrate because of limited income opportunities in Indonesia: 'we can get jobs in Sumatra, Bali or Kalimantan but it is not much money' (Agus, age 16). The boys explained they were motivated by a desire to build a house, start a family and improve their lives: 'We have to build a house first before we can marry' (Untung, age 17). Filial duty also contributed to children's decisions to migrate. Fifteen-year-old Witri was raised by her mother while her father worked overseas; when he did not return her mother also went away to work and Witri stayed with a neighbour. Witri explained that soon she would also seek work overseas: 'Our family is very poor. We need to go away to save enough money to build a concrete house and to pay for better food and for school for my little brothers. It is my duty to go'.

Many children reported feeling lonely and missing their parents. The emotions of missing parents (*kangen*) and heartache (*sakit hati*) were repeatedly expressed by the children when describing the emotional strain of being left behind. They described intense feelings of sadness related to the emotion of *kangen*: 'I feel sad inside'; 'I felt sad when he left'; 'I was really sad because I had no parents'. None of the children interviewed knew how long their parents were away for or when they were coming back. Some children perceived their parents' absence as rejection, resulting in feelings of abandonment, with many children appearing to experience what has been described elsewhere as 'the pain of ambiguous loss' (Suarez-Orozco et al. cited in Graham et al. 2011, 766). Uncertain when or if they were going to see their parents again, the children were lingering in a liminal state between separation and reunification; a feeling described by Allerton (2016) as 'stuckness'.

In contrast to feelings of *malu* about their parents' lack of success, children expressed pleasure remembering when their parents returned home with money and gifts. As described elsewhere (Coe et al. 2011), money and goods help soften the emotional blow of separation for stay-behind

children: 'I felt happy when he came home and brought me souvenirs, including a towel' (Dewi, age 14); 'When they came back they brought new shirts and trousers and that makes us happy. They also gave us money but not much' (Heri, age 15). Children whose parents did not return or send money said their feelings of *kangen*, or missing parents, were especially strong during holidays and religious celebrations when they felt excluded and different from other children in the village. Living in acute poverty means gifts from parents, even a shirt or towel, are far more meaningful than in more affluent communities, and the children cherished those gifts as expressions of their parents' love.

All the children who spoke with us said they had not been consulted when their parents decided to migrate, with one child told by her grandmother that her mother had left after she was gone. The children articulated an emotional stoicism when talking about their parents' decision to leave:

> My parents told me they are going overseas to work to pay for our school and we agree. They send us money to build a house. We do mind our parents leaving but we must agree. I don't show that I mind. (Ratna, age 13)

The tactic of hiding emotions exemplified how children in Lombok are expected to show deference and conform by expressing culturally appropriate emotions to particular circumstances in their community, to avoid feelings of *malu*. Most children said they did not want to upset their caregivers, and we heard many different ways children work to suppress emotions awaiting their parents' return. The intensity of this effort further exemplifies how *malu* is socialised as a collective emotional response to suppress intense emotions, restrain individualism, and support social harmony and power relations in the community (Lyon 1995). One girl succinctly verbalised this socialised emotion: 'Like it, don't like it, you have to like it'.

Another way children cope with parental absence is relying on friends in similar circumstances. When asked who was important in their lives, the children identified their friendships. Several described friends in similar circumstances to themselves, with one or both parents overseas: 'I have a friend who is the same like me, whose mother and father have both gone' (Ratna, age 13). The fact that parental migration was so prevalent in the communities appeared to make it easier for children to cope, as friends in similar circumstances provided emotional support by listening to their stories and making them feel less alone.

An additional form of emotional support was regular communication with parents via mobile phones and texting; however, the frequency of contact with migrant parents in our study varied considerably, and long-distance communication between different family members was not always smooth or equal. For example, one child never spoke with his parents, while another spoke with her mother every week. Unlike other studies (McKay 2007; Peng and Wong 2013) where regular communication enabled emotional ties and kept absent parents 'virtually present', most children we spoke with had inadequate or erratic communication with their absent parent(s). With no internet available in the villages, children were not able to Skype or Facebook their parents and instead relied on mobile phones. However, none of the children owned their own mobile phone and instead communicated with parents through a relative's or the village headman's phone. They therefore had to rely on another person and wait for their parents to text or call them, seeking emotional validation via distance, and 'displays of caring from abroad' (McKay 2007, 178).

Emotions in the field

As part of this special issue, we now reflect on our positionalities as researchers of migration, and how our own emotions mediated the research process. It has been well documented that researchers' emotions are integral to the research process and central to interactions in the field (Davies and Spencer 2010). We agree with other child researchers who argue the importance of emotional reflexivity to engage with our own relational emplacement during fieldwork, to develop better understandings of children's lives (Procter 2013). Our personal histories influence our research engagements, and emotions evoked during fieldwork can 'inform how we understand the situations, people, communities and interactions comprising the lifeworlds we enter' (Davies and Spencer 2010, 1).

The authors are from different academic backgrounds in human geography, child and youth care, and anthropology. We all have considerable knowledge of dominant Indonesian social norms and local Sasak cultural contexts. The lead author was an aid worker in two of the participating villages a decade earlier, which left a legacy of good feelings and tangible benefits that influenced our 'states of being' while we were in the field (Davies and Spencer 2010, 1). We were treated as honoured guests and old friends, and felt we were immediately trusted. Although feelings of good will were strong among researchers and the adult research participants, our child participants had not met us before. Our relational emplacement made us aware that children initially participated in discussions and focus groups because they were encouraged, perhaps even instructed, to do so by the adults. Acutely aware of power dynamics between us as adult researchers and the children, we tried to draw on our combined strengths as child researchers and culturally sensitive scholars, our familiarity with social life in Indonesia, and our empathy as mothers.

The clarity and intensity with which stay-behind children conveyed the emotional toll caused by their parents' migration were sometimes hard to hear, but reinforced the importance of including children's perspectives in migration studies. The depth and strength of children's stories galvanised our conviction about the importance of including children's perspectives in all research. We were consistently frustrated by the lack of children's perspectives in earlier research materials and the impact of this lacunae on family and migration studies in Indonesia. We struggled throughout the project to come to terms with adultist perspectives in the literature, in Indonesian policy and in the field, and the subsequent ongoing judgements adults make about children's capacities in the context of fragmented migrant family experiences.

Conclusion

The emotional repercussions of migration have been identified as an important aspect of transnational life. Graham and Jordan (2011, 766) called for culturally sensitive understandings of the impact of child–parent separation during migration, particularly in communities where children stay behind. Our research contributes to scholarship on culture and childhood by demonstrating how stay-behind children in East Lombok exhibit complex emotional responses to parental transnational migration; an increasingly significant global phenomena.

Our research highlighted some positive experiences and advantages for children living without one or both parents in Lombok. Almost all the children described how their friends, siblings, grandparents and extended families offered assistance and emotional support, with friendships significantly contributing to positive emotions and well-being. Numerous children who spoke with us were happy going to school and had a strong sense of duty to do well for their parents. Many children also had strong aspirations to migrate themselves, once old enough, to contribute to their family's prosperity and well-being.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, our research challenges assumptions held by some scholars, donors, NGOs, government officials and policy-makers about the resilience of children of transnational migrants. We found that for many children parental absence is devastating at a core emotional level, and that despite the importance of children and family welfare given as a rationale, decisions for their overseas migration did not include any discussion with their children. The children told us that they had deep feelings about their parents' sustained absence for unspecified periods of time which often extended beyond initial expectations. A prominent theme was the feeling of continual waiting, where children were in a liminal space longing for their parents to return, or to become old enough to migrate themselves.

Our research raises questions about the emotional well-being of stay-behind migrant children, challenging Indonesia's claims about the exclusively positive features of transnational migration in high out-migration communities. The results suggest that children with two migrant parents fare worse than children with one migrant parent in terms of their behaviour, schooling and social

interaction. Being left behind by both parents was perceived as a form of rejection by some children, resulting in feelings of abandonment and loss of self-esteem.

Interviews and focus groups exposed children's suppressed feelings of sadness and heartache about absent parents, as they missed their mothers and fathers, but were not able to articulate this easily as it was culturally inappropriate to do so. In this context, the research describes intense feelings of *malu* (shame) experienced by some children. The shared emotion of *malu* reflects adult power relations within the community and the expectations of parents regarding the right way for children and families to behave. Children embodied feelings of *malu* surrounding their parent's failed migration journeys and unpaid debts, or the changing marital circumstances of their parents, showing the extent to which their emotional well-being was tied to the behaviours and values of family.

This article provides new findings about the experiences and emotions of children of migrants, and responds to calls by Blazek and Kraftl (2015) to understand how emotions manifest in children's lives in different cultural contexts. It also responds to Kraftl's (2013, 17) call for children's geographers to 'break out of binaries', moving beyond notions of voice, agency and politics to focus on 'more than social emotional relations'. Within this context, Wells (2016) caution not to overstretch the concept of the child as 'active agent' when it cannot be stretched, is pertinent for migrant communities. Children of migrants have intense vulnerabilities which limit their capacity for agency and adult intervention is essential to restrict their exposure to neglect, maltreatment and exploitation.

When transnational migration is one of the few options for parents to earn a livelihood, more needs to be done by governments to address migrants' roles as parents and ensure the protection of children who stay behind, especially in impoverished communities. Children's psychological and social responses to their parents' long and often unpredictable absences during transnational labour migration need to be considered in policy-making and intervention design. For example, safe migration programmes could include a care plan for children who will stay behind, including strategies for regular communication among parents, children and alternative caregivers.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge how the feminisation of migration is reproducing gendered ideas about work and duty among children in migrant communities in Lombok. Understanding these differences is a key challenge for future comparative research in the Southeast Asia region. A deeper appreciation of how to meet the needs of migrant families can be achieved through child-focused research that explores the impacts of transnational migration on children's emotional well-being.

Note

1. *Merantau* refers to the traditional concept of leaving home to search for wealth and gain experience, and returning to one's village with new-found status and prestige.

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