Empowering or impeding return migration? ICT, mobile phones, and older migrants' communications with home

ALISTAIR HUNTER

School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, University of Edinburgh, Alwaleed Centre, 16 George Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9LD, UK
alistair.hunter@ed.ac.uk

Abstract   *In the last two decades, transnational social fields have been transformed by advances in information and communication technologies (ICT). Many scholars have noted the empowering effects of these technological advances for migrants. Drawing on the concept of return preparedness, it follows that ICT use should also empower prospective returnees, enabling them to be better informed and prepared for return. However, multi-sited ethnographic research with older North and West African men living in migrant worker hostels in France finds that ICT use – particularly mobile telephony –impedes return. In some instances, mobile phones serve to amplify the pressures on the men to provide financially for their stay-at-home relatives. In others, mobile phones reinforce attachments to France by facilitating networks of solidarity among hostel residents. Instead of returning definitively at retirement, many hostel residents choose a bi-residence strategy, dividing their time between France and countries of origin.*

Hostel Resident: When I have my family on the phone, they ask for money. What money? Am I supposed to steal it?

Interviewer: Your children, do they understand the difficulties you have, or are they not aware of the situation?

Hostel Resident: They know, they know, but they are demanding. … I have to send them cash, buy them things, look after my own health. I don't know which way to turn.[1]

The lives of residents in France's migrant worker hostels (*foyers de travailleurs migrants*) are often marked by dilemmas and conflicting demands. One such dilemma concerns the decision to return to places of origin in North or West Africa on retirement. Prior work has shown that older migrants' return decisions at retirement are far from straightforward, and influenced by various factors, including healthcare needs, proximity to children and other relatives, household finances, and questions of paperwork and bureaucracy (Bolzman et al. 2006; Hunter 2011). In this article, however, I will confine my analysis to the question of whether using information and communication technologies (ICT) can empower migrants to return. In the last two decades, transnational migrants' communications with their stay-at-home families have been transformed by advances in technology, particularly mobile phones and cheaper landline calls. A growing literature on the use of ICT in transnational social fields, much of it published in this journal, has noted the empowering and uniting effects of these technological advances, both for migrants and their stay-at-home family and friends (Horst 2006; Madianou 2012; Panagakos and Horst 2006; Tall 2004; Thompson 2009; Vertovec 2004; Wilding 2006). Drawing on the concept of return preparedness (Cassarino 2004), it follows that transnational ICT use should also empower prospective returnees, enabling them to be better informed about conditions in their homelands and therefore better prepared for a sustainable definitive return.

However, from my study, I found that instead of empowering hostel residents to return definitively, ICT use – particularly mobile telephony – may actually impede return. In some instances, mobile phones serve to amplify the pressures and demands on the men to provide financially for their stay-at-home relatives, leading the men to remain in France in order to be eligible for additional welfare payments that require minimum periods of residence on French territory. In other cases, mobile phones reinforce attachments to France by facilitating networks of solidarity among hostel residents. Thus, instead of returning definitively to their families on retirement, many older hostel residents choose to remain in France for extended periods, interspersed with regular return visits to their families.

These outcomes are puzzling and unexpected. Little known outside France, the majority of France's 700 or so hostels were constructed in the 1960s and 1970s at a time when migrant labour – mainly from former colonies in North and West Africa – was seen as an essential ingredient of France's postwar economic growth.[2] The hostels were conceived as a short-term housing solution for what was thought to be a short-term foreigner presence: nobody envisaged that the *same* hostels would continue to provide housing for the *same* migrants half a century later! One priority for the policy-makers charged with supervising this influx of migrant labour was the need to limit the reunification of these workers' families in France (Bernardot 2008). Migrant worker hostels were identified as a key component of this strategy, enabling residents to save and remit more funds home than would have been the case had they been obliged to support their young families in France (Viet 1999).[3] As such, hostel accommodation was explicitly aimed at young men who had emigrated to support their families as male-providers, hereafter referred to as 'breadwinners'. These migrant workers endured extended periods of separation from their families, yet this isolation was periodically

eased by annual (or less frequent) vacations spent in their places of origin.[4] Many hostel residents, especially West African workers, also created active hometown associations to sustain their bonds of attachment to places of origin.

While many of their contemporaries left the hostels following the 1973–4 oil shock, either to return home or to reunify in France with their families, a significant – though hard-to-quantify – fraction of hostel residents has remained, 'ageing within the walls' of their hostels (Renaut 2006: 175, my translation). In 2005, the average age of residents was 55 years; as of 2013 a third of residents – some 35,000 elderly migrants – were aged over 65 (Assemblée nationale 2013: 78).

At retirement, the migration decisions of hostel residents are puzzling. Counter to the expectations of the home and host governments, as well as the men themselves, many decide not to return *definitively* to reunite with their 'stay-at-home' wives and children.[5] Looking beyond family ties, hostel residents also remain unmoved by the economic incentive to return to places of origin, where the lower cost of living means that their French pensions, paid in euros and fully transferable, have far greater purchasing power. Instead of returning definitively on retirement, the vast majority of hostel residents over 55 years of age prefer to circulate between their hostel in France and their community of origin, alternating their residence for longer or shorter periods of the year. The wider aim of the project from which this analysis derives was to explain what influences this late-in-life transnational mobility. According to a survey of managers of 75 hostels housing 15,245 individuals, 95 per cent of older residents regularly make these back-and-forth trips (Bitatsi Trachet and El Moubaraki 2006: 101). The manager of the hostel where I resided for several months confirmed the significance of this phenomenon, with 80 to 90 per cent of the retirees in his establishment regularly shuttling between France and their countries of origin. From my informal conversations with residents, the minority who eschewed back-and-forth travel tended to be divorced or separated.

The findings presented here are drawn from multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, initially comprising a six-month period visiting several hostels in the northern and western suburbs of Paris on a daily basis, accompanying an employee of a migrants' rights association. I followed this with a three-month period of participant observation as a live-in resident in one hostel. As a complement to the fieldwork carried out in France, I was then privileged to experience the family life of a handful of my respondents, as an invited guest when accompanying them during their trips home to Senegal and Morocco. The study incorporated a life course dimension through use of biographical life story interviewing techniques. This helped to contextualize the ethnographic data on contemporary ICT practices, by comparing them with hostel residents' earlier communication practices. In total, some 25 hostel residents were interviewed – 12 from North Africa (Algeria and Morocco) and 13 from West Africa (Mali, Mauritania and Senegal). Those interviewed ranged in age from 55 to 75, with an average age of 66. The size of the sample precludes me from making claims about wider generalizability, instead I offer an exploratory analysis of the relationship between ICT use and return migration. Nonetheless, I argue that the counter-intuitive findings about empowerment warrant further investigation and lend weight to a more nuanced and sober reading of

migrants' ICT use, in contrast to the celebratory tone of much of the literature on this topic (for example, Tall 2004; Vertovec 2004). In addition to offering a more critical view on the relationship between ICT use and migration, I also question more optimistic accounts in the literature about ICT's potential to forge closer emotional bonds in transnational families (Benítez 2012; Levitt 2001). The third contribution of this article is to extend the emerging literature on older migrants, which is a theme attracting increased attention from scholars in the light of the demographic ageing of migrant populations in Europe and elsewhere.

Older migrants and ICT: the 'digital immigrants' phone home

Narratives of globalization often highlight advances in information and communication technologies such as the internet, email and mobile phone that overcome the friction of distance (Dicken 2011). The geographer David Harvey has coined the term 'time–space compression' to describe how transport and communication technologies have revolutionized our spatial and temporal perceptions of the world (Harvey 1990). A further corollary of globalization is said to be the growing volume of international migration: the current epoch is depicted as 'the age of migration' (Castles and Miller 2009). This is not to claim that substantial migration flows did not occur in earlier times, but rather to underline (i) the greater extent of flows affecting more and more parts of the globe; and (ii) the greater diversity of flows, such as high-skilled migration, feminization of labour migration, transit migration, student migration, and retirement migration.

At the intersection of these two literatures on globalization and international migration lies the field of migrant transnationalism. While there is unease among some scholars about conflating the concepts of globalization and transnationalism (see Faist 2000: 210–11), there is general agreement that advances in transport and communications technologies are central drivers of transnationalism (Faist 2000; Portes et al. 1999). The wider availability of these technologies has transformed transnational practices: no longer the prerogative of business elites, transnational practices are part of everyday life for a growing share of migrants (Portes et al. 1999).

Much attention has been focused on internet-based technologies in the globalization literature and migrants are often perceived to be at the 'cutting edge' when it comes to adoption of such technologies (Panagakos and Horst 2006: 111). While some migrants do indeed have the potential at their fingertips to play this pioneering role, such a generalization should be qualified by acknowledging that not all migrants possess the financial and human capital needed to exploit these opportunities to the full. A point on which there appears to be considerable unanimity among scholars is that older people are not easily able to manipulate ICT (Hamel 2009; Panagakos and Horst 2006; Tall 2004). Marc Prensky, in a much-cited paper, has gone so far as to characterize older technology users as 'digital immigrants', distinct from the younger generation of 'digital natives' who have been acquainted with ICT from their early years (Prensky 2001). An additional barrier to ICT use, especially web-based technologies, is encountered by those migrants who may have difficulties reading and writing, whether

in the host-country language or in their mother tongue. This group may include a disproportionate number of older migrants in Europe, especially the less-skilled ones who formed the post-Second World War 'guestworker' cohort. Certainly, older immigrants are often ignored in the literature on ICT adoption, and – on the few occasions when this demographic cohort is considered – they are generally judged to experience difficulties accessing such technology (Mordini et al. 2009).

Internet-based technologies continue to inspire the lion's share of scholarly enquiry in the field of migrants' ICT use (for example, Oiarzabal and Reips 2012). Less attention has been given to how developments associated with the 'seemingly pedestrian' technology of long-distance telephony link with international migration (Panagakos and Horst 2006: 111–12). While some commentators prominent in the globalization literature have emphasized new technologies and new media in their accounts (Appadurai 1996), Steve Vertovec insists that 'nothing has facilitated processes of global linkage more than the boom in ordinary, cheap international telephone calls. This is especially the case among non-elite social groups such as migrants' (Vertovec 2004: 219). Within this non-elite group, older migrants experiencing literacy problems may be especially receptive to advances in this technology.

Dialling to Dembancané: the all-conquering mobile phone

Given the importance of international telephony to migrant communities, rather than speaking of the 'rupture' that ICT adoption is held to represent (Appadurai 1996), Mattelart (2009) argues that it is more accurate to describe today's long-distance communication technologies as forming a continuity with the past, encompassing letters, phone calls, radio, television and tape-recorded messages (see also Wilding 2006).

Certainly, among my respondents in the hostels, letters and tape-recorded messages were the most popular means of communicating with family up until the 1990s. One or two public call boxes were often installed in hostels, but home villages were generally not equipped with telephone facilities. With the arrival of a post office and telephone line in 1975, Dembancané, my primary fieldwork site in Senegal, could be characterized as somewhat advanced technologically, in comparison with other Senegalese villages of a similar size.[6] However, international calling tariffs remained prohibitively expensive until the 1990s. Preferring the low-cost postal alternative, the Dembancané men living in France were obliged to go for long periods without contact. As one respondent, Djimé, put it:

> You could go two months without contact, because when you write and you send a letter to your wife or your mother, well it takes a long time for it to arrive, and then again for the response. Personally, I didn't have any problems with writing, but when the letter arrived in the village, it took time for my mother to find someone who writes, because there weren't many intellectuals in the village back then [laughs]. … To be able to write a letter you had to be something special! … Communication was difficult, very difficult, at that time. There weren't any telephones, there weren't any mobiles at that time.

It was only in the 1990s and 2000s that the price of international telecommuni-cations fell, thanks to deregulation and the improved carrying capacity of new fibre optic lines (Warf 2013). These developments heralded a sudden and quite startling exponential growth in international call volumes.[7] Vertovec (2004) cites research that shows that the use of low-cost phone cards doubled between 2000 and 2002 worldwide, and that over half of all calling card traffic was international. Moving to the specifics of the French context studied here, Pasquier (2001) noted the availability of prepaid phone cards for North and West African migrants in France from the second half of the 1990s. These considerably reduced the costs of calls, which up until then had been a major worry for migrants and their families (Mattelart 2009). With these global evolutions mirrored at the local level in the village of Dembancané, we see a boom in the use of fixed-line phones to communicate with loved ones living abroad and else-where in Senegal, and the opening of commercially-operated *téléboutiques* (telephone cabins) to serve this demand.

The Dembancané *téléboutiques* opened in the late-1990s. Yet, a mere decade later, they lie empty and obsolete, eclipsed by the all-conquering mobile phone. This change has been extremely rapid, occurring in the last ten years. In 2004–5, less than a third of the surveyed hostel residents in the Paris region affirmed having personal access to either a landline or mobile (Bitatsi Trachet and El Moubaraki 2006). Yet, by 2008–9, when this research was conducted, almost all my respondents possessed a mobile phone handset, and some owned quite advanced models. However, such technology is best able to exploit its potential for cheap international communication purposes only if one's interlocutors back home also possess such devices. The comparative advantage – in terms of cost and installation – of mobile telecommunications over fixed line infrastructure has heralded a recent boom in mobile phone use in many developing countries (Warf 2013). Morocco and Senegal, where this fieldwork was conducted, are no exceptions to this trend (Hannaford 2015). Wherever I went in both countries, mobile phones were much in evidence and I was often invited to swap numbers with friends and relatives of my hosts. Furthermore, it was easy to find convenience stores in which to buy top-up call-time, even in small villages and at roadside kiosks. These developments were summed up well by Souleymane (55, Mauritania): 'until recently, no one had mobile phones, there were just fixed lines in France in the hostel, and maybe one or two fixed lines in the village in West Africa. But now everyone's got a mobile, both in the hostel but more importantly also in the country of origin.'[8]

For hostel residents, the consequence of this boom in communications infrastructure is that use of international telecommunications technology, be it fixed-line or mobile, has become a part of daily life in a very short space of time. Many of my respondents, when asked, confirmed that they engaged in daily or near daily telephone calls with their family. Furthermore, my interviews and observations were often punctuated by incoming phone calls from home. The everyday banality that the mobile phone represents for hostel residents and their relatives remaining behind has also been documented by other authors in different migration contexts (such as Tazanu 2012; Thompson 2009).

ICT and return preparedness: mobilizing influence and managing expectations

Although not without nuance, much of the literature on mobile phone use among transnational migrants has tended to celebrate the mobile phone, positively evaluating the benefits of better quality, cheaper and more regular communication. This literature tends to attribute an empowering role to information and communication technologies when taken up by economically marginalized populations. Heather Horst describes how 'for many Jamaicans without access to a regular or reliable phone service prior to 2001, the mobile phone is viewed as an unadulterated blessing, transforming the role of transnational communication from an intermittent event to a part of daily life' (Horst 2006: 143). Similarly, as Tall enthuses in a study of mobile and fixed line phone use among Senegalese émigrés and their stay-at-home families, 'ICTs are a factor in achieving progress, a source of power that encourages people to access that power, a powerful element of social innovation' (Tall 2004: 47). Other positive appraisals of the technology abound. In Wilding's study, some of her respondents depicted affordable international calls as a 'miracle' (Wilding 2006: 131). Similarly, although Horst notes certain disadvantages of transnational mobile phone use, such as the cost of calls and handsets and the phone's potential as a tool of unwelcome surveillance, she concludes that 'it was difficult to ignore the blessings of the mobile phone' (Horst 2006: 153–4). Other commentators speak of mobile phones in the developing world as a 'pro-poor' technology (Mallalieu 2007). Much has been made of ICTs' potential to contribute to human development (Hamel 2009): a much-cited study from 2005 calculated that an increase of ten mobile phones per 100 people in developing countries in Africa increased GDP growth by 0.6 per cent (Waverman et al. 2005). Finally, Steven Vertovec describes how the unprecedented volumes of 'cheap telephone calls serve as a kind of social glue' for migrants and their home communities (Vertovec 2004: 220), a finding echoed by Benítez (2012).

Beyond ICT's well-documented empowering effects on immigrants and their stay-at-home families, an emerging literature has charted its influence in facilitating migration flows. Appadurai (1996) argued that the globally-diffused images and sound bites of electronic media that generate 'diasporic public spheres' are instrumental in precipitating all sorts of migration flows. Perkins and Neumayer (2013) suggest that chain migration may be stimulated by ICTs through exchanges between potential migrants and those who have already emigrated. Furthermore, mobile phones and other communication technologies are central in facilitating not only the flights of imagination that inspire would-be migrants, but also in facilitating the logistics of travel that some subsequently undertake. Qualitative fieldwork with sub-Saharan 'transit' migrants in North Africa has demonstrated how crucial ownership of a mobile phone is during the 'fragmented' journey to Europe (Collyer 2007; Schaub 2012).

Innovations in return migration theory also point to an important role for mobile phones and other forms of ICT in empowering return migration. The concept of 'return preparedness', proposed by Jean-Pierre Cassarino (2004), builds on earlier 'structuralist' accounts of return migration which contended that for return to be sustainable, migrants must readapt to social norms and economic and political

structures in the place to which they return (Cerase 1974; Gmelch 1980).[9] These factors can be summarized as 'vested interests and traditional ways of thinking' (Cerase 1974: 258). Authors working from this perspective tended to be pessimistic about the sustainability of return as they assumed that most prospective returnees become too detached from such norms and institutions in places of origin and are therefore 'ill prepared for their return' (Gmelch 1980: 143). Cassarino builds on this earlier focus on preparing for return by drawing on insights from the literature on transnationalism and social networks as drivers of migration. He contends that some migrants are better prepared for return thanks to the efforts and time they invest in mobilizing financial, human and social capital in both sending and receiving countries (Cassarino 2004). Clearly, the transnational exchange of information is crucial to boosting return preparedness. Hence, different types of ICT (internet, email, telephone) may be of great utility in preparing for return.

One aspect of return preparedness in the existing literature is how mobile phones facilitate new (or renewed) influence over close relatives (and extended kin members) who were previously out of reach. This potentially can cement a prospective returnee's place in the family and home community, for example through household budgeting and remittance sending. In her study of mobile phone use in Jamaican transnational fields, Horst (2006) notes that in the past sending money by post was unreliable and very time consuming. Mail was problematic because it could be intercepted, lost or 'simply did not reach the recipient in time for them to make effective use of the sum sent' (Hamel 2009: 20). Since the widespread adoption of mobile telephony in many developing countries and migrant sending regions, studies have found that phones can be used for the 'micro-coordination' of remittance transfers and to specify how the money sent is to be used (Horst 2006: 153; Perkins and Neumayer 2013; Tazanu 2012).

As with household budgets, fixed and mobile phone technologies can be harnessed to coordinate and manage household activities (Hamel 2009; Thompson 2009; Wilding 2006), potentially giving migrants more influence over family members previously out of reach. Critically for this discussion, researchers have also found that emigrants can use such technology to better manage the expectations of their loved ones back home. Horst (2006: 154) argues that 'the increased communication enabled through the presence of house phones and especially the ownership of mobile phones has led Jamaicans to more realistic expectations of the migration experience.'

The 'pressure of communicability'

On first inspection, these positive evaluations of mobile phone use and other information technologies as facilitating transnational communication and managing expectations are hardly surprising: what could be problematic about cheaper, more regular and better quality communications between migrants and their loved ones in countries of origin? However, a different picture emerged during the fieldwork for this article. While, intuitively, one would expect cheaper and better quality communications between hostel residents and their families to empower return by boosting return preparedness, this was far from always the case.

For some respondents, the new technologies were positively viewed. As Hamid (70, Taroudant, Morocco) pointed out, before the mobile phone, the only way to maintain contact was by letter. Communication by letter was a painfully slow and intermittent process. By contrast, when we met in 2009, Hamid spoke of daily phone calls to his wife and children. He also talked about sending text and photo messages, and about his family calling him over the internet using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) applications such as Skype. These technological developments are changes for the better in his opinion. The same applied to money transfers: before it would take 15 to 20 days for a postal money order to arrive in his Moroccan hometown. At the time of research, money wired by Western Union would arrive in a matter of seconds.

The speed of money transfer services such as Western Union was seen as a notable advance, and the mobile phone was essential in requesting these transfers and coordinating their timing. As Hadyatou (Dembancané, Senegal) put it, 'when they need food, or anything else, they call me, then I send immediately what is required. [So you are often in contact?] Yes, always in contact, to see if they have everything they need at home, so when they lack something, they get the money straight away.' Issa (70, Tambacounda, Senegal) said, 'the money arrives immediately, but they call to check you've sent it too!'

Issa's quote, however, implies a less welcome feature of mobile phone use for hostel residents. The potential of mobile phones to generate more measured expectations of the migrant from those remaining behind was not a feature of my respondents' narratives. Quite the opposite, as the epigraph at the start of this article showed. Their exchanges with family members back home were not always affectionate or attentive, but instead revolved around the apparently ever-increasing financial needs of the household.

As noted above, the hostel residents came to France as 'breadwinner' migrants, on the expectation that they would regularly remit a large portion of their French earnings to their parents and/or young families who had stayed behind. Breadwinner migration was widespread in the North and West African sending regions and, over time, developed into a 'culture of migration' whereby cross-border mobility becomes so entrenched in a community's collective consciousness that it becomes normative (Kandel and Massey 2002). Such a culture developed readily in the patriarchal societies of North and West Africa, where men achieve social status by taking sole responsibility for household material needs and for accumulating wealth, as Bourdieu (1965) found in his early ethnographic work among the Kabyle of Algeria (cf. Manchuelle 1997 for information on Soninke emigration from West Africa to France).

In interviews, hostel residents highlighted the 'pressures' they were under to attend to these household needs. Waly (75, from Kayès in Mali) drew an interesting distinction between his simple existence in France and the wide-ranging responsibilities inherent in his role as head of the family when back in his home village in Mali. The role of male breadwinner, also observable in other migration contexts (Kitiarsa 2009), was so integral to my respondents' migration culture that the hostel residents continued to deeply identify with it well past retirement age (Hunter 2015), as Waly notes:

493

> We live in a kind of solitude, but over there [in Mali] there's more responsibility. Here [in France] we just have to take care of ourselves, our health etc., but over there, you're the dad, you're the head of the family who must look after everyone, who must take care of all sorts of problems. …When you are retired, you should be of service over there.

Importantly, with the advent of the mobile phone it had become less and less possible to ignore these expectations emanating from home. Mobile phones were identified by my respondents as a key factor in exacerbating this sense of patriarchal responsibility. Souleymane (55, Mauritania) aptly described this as 'the pressure of communicability' (*la pression de la communicabilité*): 'every wife has a phone, so the men are constantly in communication with their families back home and this creates a certain pressure; you are much more aware of everything going on in the village, and your responsibilities weigh heavier.'

Intriguingly, few scholars of migration and ICTs have written about these pressures. This inattention to the remittance 'burden' generated by ICTs may derive in part from the fact that most studies of remittances focus on *recipients* in the country of origin, not the *senders* (see Riak Akuei 2005). Although not addressing the topic directly, Vertovec hints at such pressures when he comments that 'for migrants and their kin in distant parts of the world, telephone calls can only provide a kind of punctuated sociality that can heighten emotional strain as well as alleviate it' (Vertovec 2004: 223). Primus Tazanu's monograph about the use of ICT in Cameroonian transnational social fields goes further by explicitly highlighting the potential of new technologies to foment grudges between Cameroonians living in Europe and their stay-at-home relatives and friends, particularly when it comes to coordinating remittances (Tazanu 2012). This same phenomenon is touched on by Raelene Wilding, who notes that 'in some cases the availability of contact created its own anxieties – particularly when kin used ICTs to demand remittances from the refugees' (Wilding 2006: 135). Similarly, Stephanie Riak Akuei (2005) describes similar dynamics among Dinka refugees from southern Sudan living in San Diego: some of her respondents went so far as to change their phone numbers without informing family members.

While none of my own respondents admitted changing their phone number, several made a link between the increasing burden of their responsibilities and the advent of improved telecommunications. Amadou (64, Goudiri, Senegal) talked about being in regular contact with home via mobile phones, concluding that 'all in all, there are many responsibilities: you have to give to almost everyone.' For others, the dissonance created by being simultaneously far away (in body) but within earshot was an unwelcome break with the 'easy life' of the past, when intensive transnational communication was rare. As Issa (70, Tambacounda, Senegal) explained:

> Before, life was easy, there was no difficulty. Because we weren't sending money like nowadays, like all the time. We used to send money at the end of the month. Now, all the time, they ask you for money, one person's ill, the other

one needs this, the other that, it's not like before. … These days, there's Western Union, there's Moneygram, there's the fax, there's all that. … Nowadays, if they have a problem back home, it comes straight back to you.

Issa's quote here exemplifies the breadwinner role, insofar as he is expected to provide for his extended family. In the next section, I show how this breadwinner role may persist into retirement.

Amplifying the breadwinner burden after retirement

Fieldwork in the hostels revealed that the pressure on the men to fulfil the breadwinner role did not diminish following retirement. This had a major bearing on return decision-making. For older migrants, the transition to retirement means a lifting of the sedentary constraint of participation in the labour market, and thus marks an appropriate juncture to return home if so desired. For hostel residents, in addition to their emotional ties to places of origin, there is an incontrovertible economic rationale for return at retirement. Old-age pension funds accumulated in France are exportable to countries of origin in their entirety (minus minor fees incurred for currency exchange). From a neoclassical economics perspective, the higher purchasing power of the pension in a country like Senegal or Morocco means that return is the rational choice, since the cost of living is cheaper there (Klinthäll 2006). A few of my respondents concurred with Djimé (Dembancané, Senegal) when he said that even with a minimal monthly pension income in the region of €500 one could 'live comfortably. You're not the same as those who don't have any resources, who don't have a pension; it's not the same life'.

Overall, however, this was a minority viewpoint. Most of my respondents had not returned definitively, thus calling into question these neoclassical principles. Individual wealth proved illusory when set against the large numbers of relatives in the pensioner's financial charge. For respondents in this family situation, it did not make sense to talk of individual decision-making. As many respondents acknowledged, the next generation was not in a position to take over responsibility for family welfare: adult and adolescent children did not have the means to support themselves let alone any young children they may themselves have. As a result, hostel residents felt a continuing obligation to provide financially for a significant number of dependent relatives. For example Issa (70, Tambacounda, Senegal) reported that seven of his children were still living at home, some still at school. Likewise, Hadyatou (Dembancané, Senegal) counted several children still at school. Lahcen, a community development campaigner in Taroudant Province, Morocco, explained: 'one of the major sins committed by the retired hostel residents [is that] they haven't pushed their kids to work. The son is 40 years old but does nothing … he stays at home all day watching television, and asks for some pocket money to go buy a coffee.' Moussa (55, Mali) described these expectations as part of a broader attitude: 'the traditional type of society is in the course of being destroyed, transformed into a society of assistance and dependence … a parachuted comfort.'

Most crucially, because of this persistent filial dependency on their earnings, some of my respondents chose to remain in France to receive additional welfare allocations, which helped to finance their families' outgoings. Those aged over 65 receiving modest pensions are eligible for a means-tested old-age income support benefit, the *allocation de solidarité aux personnes âgées* (ASPA), colloquially known as the *minimum vieillesse*. Among the conditions of eligibility for this benefit, absolutely critical (for hostel residents) is the requirement to be resident in France for more than six months per year. Consequently, some hostel residents are able to satisfy their families' material needs, but only by prolonging their exile. As Issa (70, Tambacounda, Senegal) explained, 'now I am old, I'm not able to work. At retirement, what I earn isn't enough for me to live with my children, with my wife. … So I requested the *minimum vieillesse*, it helps a bit. It's better now.' Other authors have described this highly constrained and emotionally painful geographical separation of families as a type of 'house arrest' (Hmed 2006: 122, my translation), with those so condemned being 'hostages to France, although their state of health or age would favour a prolonged return to their family back home' (Bitatsi Trachet and El Moubaraki 2006: 104, my translation).

However, for some hostel residents, non-return at retirement was not just a function of financial viability for households in places of origin, but also a response to a perceived loss of control over their families, leading to resentments. The normative obligation to fulfil the gendered role of breadwinner – amplified by mobile phones – can engender family conflicts, which in turn may call into question patriarchal family values. Wives and children who have stayed behind gain autonomy at the expense of the older hostel residents. There was sometimes resentment from North African hostel residents at the authority which wives have been able to gain. 'A wife is like a wallet', said one, 'she keeps your money.' There is potential for the wives of hostel residents to transform the patriarchal model of family roles, by assuming control of the household budget, as well as the children's education and discipline. After long working years spent apart, several respondents were wary of shifting to a new daily routine at retirement that would require them to return to live with their wives on a full-time basis. The typical result, according to Idrissa (Dembancané, Senegal), is a 'clash of personalities', occasionally leading to divorce on retirement. After a certain time spent away from the village, 'one loses one's bearings as the head of the household. Likewise, the wife has lost the habit of living together' (Souleymane, 55, Mauritania).

A similar loss of control can arise in their relationships with their adult children. Denis, a hostel manager, noted that 'they slave away here for their children, but their children aren't grateful.' Even harder for some fathers to bear is the discovery that their children behave in the same way as young people in France, in other words like 'delinquents'. Kader (72, Mostaghanem, Algeria) noted this 'moral degeneration' of the youth in his home country. As a result, some men only stay home for a few months because they are unsettled by the growing autonomy of their families. 'We get fed up, and decide to come back [to France]' (Kemal, 63, Algeria). Such bitterness and 'grudges' can lead to return being postponed. The result of these accumulated conflicts is that the hostel becomes an escape from their problems. As Saleem (60, Guelmime, Morocco) put it, 'when he is back [in the hostel] he is relieved … it is a refuge for them.'

Exploitation and entrapment or friendship and free movement?

Given the empowering virtues of ICTs, as stressed in the literature, and the lower take-up of such technology among older people, one might assume that older hostel residents who use this technology are among the most empowered of all senior citizens. On the contrary, it is found that ICTs actually serve to exacerbate or amplify the men's breadwinner burdens, calling into question the empowerment thesis. Instead of feeling empowered, geographically single hostel residents speak of being 'trapped' by a situation that they have no way of changing. Saleem (60, Guelmime, Morocco) said that:

> ninety per cent of us are trapped in this situation. We are trapped in this situation because it is a situation that has become monotonous. … So we – excuse my language – but we become slaves, of ourselves. Because when you have a child and that child gets married, you have to work for the grandchildren too.

Issa (70, Tambacounda, Senegal) spoke of how 'nowadays, you earn money, but you never free yourself from problems. Before, you would earn a bit, but there weren't many problems that bothered us, which trapped us. These days, you earn, but it doesn't stay in your pocket long.'

New communications technology, while a blessing in some ways, contributes to this sense of burden by making it easier for extended family back home to 'exploit' the family connections for money and other types of remittance. As Saleem (60, Guelmime, Morocco) again put it:

> I don't feel at ease, because I feel that – I feel I am alone, and I am still exploited – exploited by those who are here [in France] and those who are there [back home]. … It's true that it's my family, but I'm exploited all the same, because I don't have a choice. Well, if they have bills to pay, it's me who pays because they don't have anyone other than me.

Despite these negative words about family burdens constraining older migrants to remain in France, it is important to signal that new communication technologies can also encourage positive attachments to France insofar as they facilitate friendship and solidarity with neighbours in the hostel. While much of the academic and media commentary on the hostels is negative, denouncing the living conditions that – objectively-speaking – fall well short of the standards one would expect for older citizens, it is nonetheless the case that this accommodation represents 'home' in France for many thousands of residents. Friendship with hostel neighbours is one aspect of this homeliness, and the mobile phone can be used to facilitate these attachments over long distances during periodic return trips to their countries of origin.

Such technology can also be deployed instrumentally among networks of friends in order to alert absent neighbours to matters that require their prompt attention in France, such as administrative notifications relating to healthcare, banking, social security and

pensions. Residents will give their mailbox key to a neighbour before leaving for Africa on the understanding that those remaining in the hostel will periodically check their mail, especially for 'official-looking' correspondence. Thanks to this mailbox tactic, residents can be forewarned to return to France in the event of a medical appointment or pressing administrative task. 'It's not so difficult, the paperwork, it's not too difficult if there is someone who can let you know, then you reply straightaway, no problem' (Issa, 70, Tambacounda, Senegal). I myself was asked during my time as a live-in resident to look out for any letters in my mailbox addressed to the man who previously had my room: this individual was back in North Africa at the time.

The solidarity inherent in these practices demonstrates that remaining in France is not just a matter of constraint prompted by family expectations and welfare dependency, but can also be a matter of choice, offering opportunities to benefit from friendship and amenities such as inexpensive and high quality healthcare. While the scope of this article precludes me from treating these points in detail (see Hunter 2011 for an overview), it is instructive to note that mobile phones can help residents manage their freedom of movement in certain contexts, just as such technology can impede it in other contexts, as discussed above.

Conclusion

In the past, long-distance communications between international migrants and their families in places of origin were often slow and intermittent: sporadic communication inhibited transnational practices. This situation has changed out of all recognition in the last decade thanks to advances in information and communication technologies such as email, other web-based platforms like Skype, and mobile and fixed-line telephones. These technologies are no longer confined to international elites but have become increasingly available to all categories of migrants.

In this article, I have sought to draw connections between the empowering potential of ICT and three bodies of literature concerning, respectively, older migrants, return migration and transnational families. Regarding the first theme, older people are generally believed to experience more barriers in accessing and manipulating information and communication technologies, giving rise to the term 'digital immigrants' (Prensky 2001). On this basis, one would expect the subjects of this case study – older migrants, many with limited literacy, living in marginalized accommodation for low-skilled workers – to feature among the least 'connected' citizens. Nevertheless, the hostel residents confound expectations in their high rates of mobile phone ownership and sophisticated use of such technology to manage household affairs back home. This conclusion contrasts with the more pessimistic accounts in the literature on older migrants, notably Abdelmalek Sayad's (1999) characterization of old age in exile as a 'double absence', socially isolated in both the host society and the place of origin.

Much of the literature on ICT use by transnational migrants has tended to celebrate the empowering effects of recent technological advances in facilitating migrant journeys and uniting transnational families. Drawing on the concept of return preparedness (Cassarino 2004), it follows that ICT use should also empower prospective

returnees, enabling them to be better informed and prepared for return. Older hostel residents are in a position to undertake return, as they are retired and no longer bound by the sedentary constraint of participation in the French labour market. What is more, they have an incentive to return, given the greater purchasing power of their French pension income in places of origin. However, as discussed above, the overwhelming preference of older hostel residents at retirement is not for definitive return but for back-and-forth mobility, maintaining their principle residence in France. Importantly, this preference is mediated by new communications technology. On the one hand, mobile phones were used to maintain a connection to France, allowing the men to stay in touch with their friends and neighbours when away and to ensure continuity of access to French healthcare and social security. On the other hand, mobile phones may amplify the pressures and demands on the men to provide financially for their stay-at-home relatives, which led some to choose to extend their sojourns in France to avoid family conflicts. Others justified their extended absence in terms of the need to remit additional funds home by claiming welfare allocations to which they are legitimately entitled but which require minimum periods of residence in France.

Heather Horst has drawn our attention to the way the mobile phone becomes a lens for understanding the shifting power dynamics between migrants and stay-at-homes (Horst 2006). Other nuanced accounts have shown that these power dynamics have gendered underpinnings, with ICT use not necessarily liberating migrant women but instead perpetuating unequal gender relationships (Parreñas 2005; cf. Madianou 2012). It is also important to acknowledge that it is not necessarily always migrants who experience disempowerment on account of the virtual co-presence afforded by trans-national ICT use. As Dinah Hannaford recounts in her study of Senegalese transnational marriages, stay-at-home wives may come to profoundly resent the increased capacity for control and surveillance that communication technologies offer their jealous and suspicious husbands (Hannaford 2015). My positionality as a male guest in the households of my respondents while accompanying them during their visits to Senegal and Morocco greatly constrained my opportunities to gain insights into the worldview of female household members. Notwithstanding this limitation of my research design, it is striking to note the respondents' ambivalence about the empowering and uniting effects of transnational ICT use as reported in both Hannaford's article (which prioritized non-migrant perspectives) and in this study, which focused on older migrants' narratives.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Excerpt from the documentary film, *Un jour je repartirai...* [One day I will go back…], directed by Chantal Richard, 2002; my translation.

2. Usually housing 200–300 individuals, the vast majority of hostels provide accommodation in small single rooms (7.5 square metres is the median surface area). The rooms generally open onto long corridors, in a layout similar to that found in many modern hotel chains and university halls of residence. Cooking and washing facilities are communal in all but the most recently built or renovated hostels.

3. For more information on the history of the migrant worker hostel policy, see Bernardot (2008) and Viet (1998).

4. Given the higher cost of transportation, West African workers returned home less regularly than their North African counterparts, but tended to return for longer periods (two or three months was typical among my respondents).

5. As of 1999, seven out of ten residents were married, and one in two was father to four or more children (Renaut 2006).

6. Unlike my fieldwork sites in North Africa, I have deliberately identified this town by name following requests by elders 'to put Dembancané on the map'. To protect the anonymity of respondents from this town of approximately 7000 inhabitants, I have omitted identifying features such as age, number of children, or occupation in France. As with all other respondents, I have attributed a pseudonym to interviewees from Dembancané.

7. In 1982, international call minutes stood at 12.7 billion. By 1992, this figure had risen to 42.7 billion, and by 2001 to 154 billion minutes (cited in Vertovec 2004: 219–20).

8. Quotations from respondents (other than those from Dembancané, see note 6) will be henceforth attributed according to the following formula: first name (age, home region, country). To further protect anonymity, all given names are pseudonyms.

9. 'Structuralism' is not a term which Cerase or Gmelch themselves used. Instead, I have been guided in this choice of terminology by Cassarino (2004), who uses this term to categorize their contributions in his typology of return migration theories.

References

Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Assemblée nationale (2013) *Rapport d'information fait au nom de la mission d'information sur les immigrés âgés* (no. 1214), Paris: Assemblée nationale, available at: www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/rap-info/i1214.asp.

Benítez, J. L. (2012) 'Salvadoran transnational families: ICT and communication practices in the network society', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38 (9), 1439–49, doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2012.698214.

Bernardot, M. (2008) *Loger les immigrés: la Sonacotra 1956–2006*, Broissieux: Editions du Croquant.

Bitatsi Trachet, F. and M. El Moubaraki (2006) 'Prise en charge du vieillissement de la population en foyers de travailleurs migrants et résidences sociales', *Migrations Santé*, 127 (8), 97–114.

Bolzman, C., R. Fibbi and M. Vial (2006) 'What to do after retirement? Elderly migrants and the question of return', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32 (8), 1359–75, doi: 10.1080/13691830600928748.

Bourdieu, P. (1965) 'The sentiment of honour in Kabyle society', in J. G. Peristiany (ed.), translated by P. Sherrard, *Honour and shame: the values of Mediterranean society*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 191–241.

Cassarino, J.-P. (2004) 'Theorising return migration: the conceptual approach to return migrants revisited', *International Journal of Multicultural Societies*, 6 (2), 253–79, available at: www.unesco.org/shs/ijms/vol6/issue2/art4.

Castles, S. and M. J. Miller (2009) *The age of migration: international population movements in the modern world* (4th edition), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cerase, F. P. (1974). 'Expectations and reality: a case study of return migration from the United States to Southern Italy', *International Migration Review*, 8 (2), 245–62, doi: 10.2307/3002783.

Collyer, M. (2007) 'In-between places: trans-Saharan transit migrants in Morocco and the fragmented journey to Europe', *Antipode*, 39 (4), 668–90, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.2007.00546.x.

Dicken, P. (2011) *Global shift: mapping the changing contours of the world economy* (6th edition), London: Sage.

Faist, T. (2000) *The volume and dynamics of international migration and transnational social spaces*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gmelch, G. (1980) 'Return migration', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 9, 135–59, doi: 10.1146/annurev.an.09.100180.001031.

Hamel, J.-Y. (2009) 'Information and communication technologies and migration', *Human Development Research Paper (HDRP) 2009/39*, New York: United Nations Development Programme, available at: http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdrp_2009_39.pdf.

Hannaford, D. (2015) 'Technologies of the spouse: intimate surveillance in Senegalese transnational marriages', *Global Networks*, 15 (1), 43–59, doi:10.1111/glob.12045.

Harvey, D. (1990) *The condition of postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Hmed, C. (2006) 'Habitat et parcours de vie: approche sociologique du vieillissement des immigrés en foyers pour travailleurs migrants', *Migrations Santé*, 127 (8), 115–41.

Horst, H. A. (2006) 'The blessings and burdens of communication: cell phones in Jamaican transnational social fields', *Global Networks*, 6 (2), 143–59, doi:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2006.00138.x.

Hunter, A. (2011) 'Theory and practice of return migration at retirement: the case of migrant worker hostel residents in France', *Population, Space and Place*, 17 (2), 179–92, doi: 10.1002/psp.610.

Hunter, A. (2015) '"Family values" – La dépendance familiale sur les transferts d'argent et le dilemme de retour au pays d'origine en âge avancé', *Revue Hommes et Migrations*, 1309, 117–26, available at: www.hommes-et-migrations.fr/index.php?/numeros/migrants-face-aux-defis-du-vieillissement/7539--family-re-values.

Kandel, W. and D. S. Massey (2002) 'The culture of Mexican migration: a theoretical and empirical analysis', *Social Forces*, 80 (3), 981–1004, doi: 10.1353/sof.2002.0009.

Kitiarsa, P. (2009) 'The lyrics of laborious life: popular music and the reassertion of migrant manhood in northeastern Thailand', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 10 (3), 381–98, doi: 10.1080/14649370902949374.

Klinthäll, M. (2006) 'Retirement return migration from Sweden', *International Migration*, 44 (2), 153–80, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2435.2006.00367.x.

Levitt, P. (2001) *The transnational villagers*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Madianou, M. (2012) 'Migration and the accentuated ambivalence of motherhood: the role of ICTs in Filipino transnational families', *Global Networks*, 12 (3), 277–95, doi: 10.1111/j.1471-0374.2012.00352.x.

Mallalieu, K. (2007) *Pro poor mobile capabilities: service offering in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Lima: DIRSI, available at: www.dirsi.net/files/finals/070216--mallalieu.pdf.

Manchuelle, F. (1997) *Willing migrants: Soninke labor diasporas, 1848–1960*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Mattelart, T. (2009) 'Les diasporas à l'heure des technologies de l'information et de la communication: petit état des savoirs', *tic&société*, 3 (1–2), 11–57, available at: http://ticetsociete.revues.org/600.

Mordini, E., D. Wright, P. de Hert, E. Mantovani, K. R. Wadhwa, J. Thestrup and G. Van Steendam (2009) 'Ethics, e-inclusion and ageing', *Studies in Ethics, Law, and Technology*, 3 (1), 1–35, doi: 10.2202/1941-6008.1093.

Oiarzabal, P. J. and U.-D. Reips (2012) 'Migration and diaspora in the age of information and communication technologies', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38 (9), 1333–8, doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2012.698202.

Panagakos, A. N. and H. A. Horst (2006) 'Return to Cyberia: technology and the social worlds of transnational migrants', *Global Networks*, 6 (2), 109–24, doi: 10.1111/j.1471-0374.2006.00136.x.

Parreñas, R. (2005) 'Long distance intimacy: class, gender and intergenerational relations between mothers and children in Filipino transnational families', *Global Networks*, 5 (4), 317–36, doi: 10.1111/j.1471-0374.2005.00122.x.

Pasquier, D. (2001) '"La famille, c'est un manque." Enquête sur les nouveaux usages de la téléphonie dans les familles immigrées: médias et migrations', *Réseaux*, 19 (107), 181–208, available at: http://reseaux.revuesonline.com/article.jsp?articleId=370.

Perkins, R. and E. Neumayer (2013) 'The ties that bind: the role of migrants in the uneven geography of international telephone traffic', *Global Networks*, 13 (1), 79–100, doi: 10.1111/j.1471-0374.2012.00366.x.

Portes, A., L. E. Guarnizo and P. Landolt (1999) 'The study of transnationalism: pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22 (2), 217–37, doi: 10.1080/014198799329468.

Prensky, M. (2001) 'Digital natives, digital immigrants (part 1)', *On the Horizon*, 9 (5), 1–6, doi: 10.1108/10748120110424816.

Renaut, S. (2006) 'D'un recensement à l'autre: 1990–1999, la population immigrée en foyers de travailleurs', *Retraite et société*, 1 (47), 170–93, available at: www.cairn.info/revue-retraite-et-societe-2006-1-page-170.htm.

Riak Akuei, S. (2005) *Remittances as unforeseen burdens: the livelihoods and social obligations of Sudanese refugees*, Geneva: GCIM.

Sayad, A. (1999) *La double absence: des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*, Paris: Seuil.

Schaub, M. L. (2012) 'Lines across the desert: mobile phone use and mobility in the context of trans-Saharan migration', *Information Technology for Development*, 18 (2), 126–44, doi: 10.1080/02681102.2011.604082.

Tall, S. M. (2004) 'Senegalese émigrés: new information and communication technologies', *Review of African Political Economy*, 31 (99), 31–48, doi: 10.1080/0305624042000258405.

Tazanu, P. M. (2012) *Being available and reachable: new media and Cameroonian transnational sociality*, Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa Research & Publishing.

Thompson, E. C. (2009) 'Mobile phones, communities and social networks among foreign workers in Singapore', *Global Networks*, 9 (3), 359–80, doi:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2009.00258.x.

Vertovec, S. (2004) 'Cheap calls: the social glue of migrant transnationalism', *Global Networks*, 4 (2), 219–24, doi:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2004.00088.x.

Viet, V. (1998) *La France immigrée: construction d'une politique, 1914–1997*, Paris: Fayard.

Viet, V. (1999) 'La politique du logement des immigrés (1945–1990)', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 64 (1), 91–103, doi: 10.2307/3770393.

Warf, B. (2013) 'Geographies of global telephony in the age of the internet', *Geoforum*, 45, 219–29, doi: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.11.008.

Waverman, L., M. Meschi and M. Fuss (2005) 'The impact of telecoms on economic growth in developing countries', in *Africa: the impact of mobile phones, moving the debate forward: the Vodafone policy paper series*, 10–23, available at: www.enlightenmenteconomics.com/assets/africamobile.pdf.

Wilding, R. (2006) '"Virtual" intimacies? Families communicating across transnational contexts', *Global Networks*, 6 (2), 125–42, doi:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2006.00137.x.