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To cite this article: Mavis Dako-Gyeke (2016) We never plan to return home: voices of pre-migrant Ghanaian youth, Journal of Youth Studies, 19:2, 169-182, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2015.1059929

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1059929

Published online: 31 Jul 2015.

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We never plan to return home: voices of pre-migrant Ghanaian youth

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(Received 31 October 2014; accepted 4 June 2015)

This qualitative study aimed to explore return migration intentions among pre-migrant youth in Ghana. The study applied the neoclassical economics, new economics of labor migration, and structuralist theories. Thirty-four students (16 females and 18 males) were purposively recruited as participants for the study. Each student participated in one out of four digitally recorded focus group discussions. The data were analyzed to identify emerging themes that addressed objectives of the study. Participants were final year undergraduate and graduate university students and their ages ranged from 22 to 34 years. Analysis of the data revealed that participants had plans to migrate to the diaspora to seek income-generating and educational opportunities. Furthermore, evidence showed that the youth included in this study had no intentions of returning to their country of origin due to three major reasons (economic, family pressure, and stigma). For many pre-migrants, returning to their country of origin is not an option, especially if they are able achieve their goals in the diaspora. Given that return migration usually involves labor migrants who did not reap the benefits of higher earnings abroad and were therefore regarded as failed migrants, there is the need for government and other stakeholders to initiate policies that address the socioeconomic and psychological challenges faced by return migrants.

Keywords: Ghana; intentions; migration; return; re-emigration; youth

Introduction

In contemporary times, transnational migration is widely recognized as a feature of countries in sub-Saharan Africa including Ghana, and this has attracted extensive attention in terms of research and policy. Most often, people migrate either internally or internationally to explore better livelihoods, educational opportunities, refuge prospects, among others. Migration, therefore, offers a chance to see the world, gain new experiences, learn new languages, develop intercultural understanding, and by and large broaden people’s outlook (King and Vullnetari 2009). Migration is both a journey and an expedition because it involves cultural and economic processes in which identities are contested and challenged, new living conditions established, and old ones transformed (Maron and Connell 2008).

As the world enters a period of unparalleled globalization and economic interconnectness (Wang 2013), many people, especially the youth, are motivated to migrate. In 2013, it was estimated that there were 232 million international migrants living in the world (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2013). Generally, immigrant-receiving countries are interested in harnessing the benefits of migration from young...
people, and migrant-sending countries aim at capitalizing on social and economic impacts of money and other transfers (Adsera, McLanahan, and Tienda 2013). A major consequence of migration has been an accelerated international migration of young educated people, principally from developing countries to more developed countries, a phenomenon known as brain drain (Akl et al. 2007; Mullan 2005). In Ghana, for instance, the majority of youth travel abroad in order to escape unemployment and poverty in the country (Allotey and Say 2013).

King and Vullnetari (2009) note that the idea of emigration as a quest for self-realization is more widespread among better-educated younger generation, especially those in urban areas of a country. It is assumed that before migrating, many people have ideas and information about prospects and challenges in the intended destination countries. This has become easier in this time and age of technological advancement, increasing interconnectedness and globalization. These notwithstanding, many migrants are vulnerable to low wages, insecure working arrangements, and abuse by employers, particularly if they are undocumented (King and Vullnetari 2009). When living in home countries, the youth often dream of other more ideal life, but after experiencing these destination countries, their dreams, expectations, beliefs, and identities may change (Teo 2011) resulting in return migration.

Among the different stages of the migration process, return is the least understood because researchers and policy-makers have focused mainly on decisions for departure. As a result, not much has been done to recognize migration as a multidimensional process that involves not only emigration, but also settlement in the host country and the likelihood of return (Oomen 2013). Return migration is the movement of emigrants back to their countries of origin to resettle (Gmelch 1980). According to Gmelch (1980), there are three main types of return migrants (1) temporary migrants (returnees who intended temporary migration), (2) forced returnees (returnees who intended permanent migration but were forced to return), and (3) voluntary returnees (returnees who intended permanent migration but chose to return).

Depending on the type of return and migration experience abroad, returnees may require governmental and social support to facilitate their reintegration. A major challenge is that upon return many returnees remain in situations of vulnerability since their dreams of improving themselves in the diapora were not achieved and as a result could be in worse situations (Kuschminder 2014). There is a high desire to re-emigrate among many returnees due to poverty and difficulties associated with finding jobs back in their home countries (Black, n.d.; Collyer 2012). In this regard, returnees could benefit from support services, such as general counseling, shelters, training, and employment opportunities (Kuschminder 2014). The provision of these services could reduce the extent to which returnees would consider re-migration. Usually, when conditions in the home country are not compatible with returnees’ future plans, the desire to re-emigrate is likely to be high.

Even though the link between integration processes and return migration is likely to depend on initial intentions for migrating (De Haas, Fokkema, and Fihri 2009), little is known about the migration intentions of Ghanaian youth. In view of the fact that reasons for migrating are important predictors of return migration (Makina 2012), this study, which is part of a larger project, goes beyond extant research to gain an in-depth understanding of the return migration intentions among pre-migrant final year students in a public university in Ghana. Specifically the study sought:
(1) To find out countries of preference of final year university students who intend to migrate after graduation.
(2) To find out the career plans of final year university students who intend to migrate to the diaspora after graduation.
(3) To explore final year university students’ plans of returning to their home country after migrating to the diaspora.

Theoretical perspectives

In the context of international migration, three broad perspectives (the neoclassical economics theory, the new economics of labor migration (NELM) theory, and the structuralist theory) attempt to explain return migration. Although they posit different approaches, each provides useful insights regarding the reasons for which people move abroad and return home (Cassarino 2004). These theories are useful for this study because they draw attention to why people, especially the youth, migrate and why they prefer some countries to others. Additionally, the theories’ emphasis on migrants’ expectations regarding destination countries is valuable for exploring and understanding pre-migrants’ return decisions.

Todaro (1969) propounded the neoclassical economics theory and argued that wage differentials between receiving and sending countries, as well as migrant’s expectations for higher earnings in destination countries are the main drivers of migration. Since many people migrate for economic reasons, before embarking on their journeys, emigrants usually have information about opportunities in the intended host countries as compared with opportunities in their countries of origin (Makina 2012). In a neoclassical stance, return migration involves mainly labor migrants who miscalculated the costs of migration and therefore did not reap the benefits of higher earnings (Cassarino 2004; Constant and Massey 2002).

Return migration is perceived as a sign of failed migration experience, which indicates that the expected higher earnings in the country of destination did not become a reality and thereby resulted in a decision to return home. One would expect then that if a lower income level does not match an educational level of the migrant, he or she is likely to return (Makina 2012). Extant research findings, however, remain divisive regarding the neoclassical theory. While Reagan and Olsen (2000) could not find skill bias in their analysis of returnees from the USA, Cohen and Haberfeld (2001) found Israel-born Jews returning home from the USA to have had higher educational levels than those who did not return.

The second type of explanation is based on Oded Stark’s (1991) seminal work, the NELM approach, which views return migration as the logical result of a calculated strategy, defined at the migrant’s household level, and resulting from the successful achievement of goals (Cassarino 2004). The theory shifts the focus of migration from individual independence to mutual interdependence by arguing that migration is a livelihood approach employed by households and families to spread income risks and overcome market constraints (Cassarino 2004). As a result, households send out their best prepared individuals to earn income abroad and the money they send back home serves to spread income risks, increase income, improve living conditions, and enable investment (Cassarino 2004; Makina 2012).

According to the NELM, return migration is a natural outcome of successful migration experience, where migrants would have met their goals of earning higher
incomes and accumulating savings during their stay in destination countries (Makina 2012). In the case of a prolonged stay, the NELM theory suggests that it is due to repeated postponement of return in order to achieve goals as migrants stay in host countries for a limited period of time (Cassarino 2004; Makina 2012). Extended stays are linked with maintenance of strong transnational relations with home countries, Makina (2012) asserts. Supporting this theory, Ammassari (2004) found higher levels of entrepreneurship among Ivorian and Ghanaian migrants that could be attributed to savings in destination countries. As well, Alberts and Hazen (2005) provided evidence of more job opportunities back home for Tanzanian students in the USA.

Using both the neoclassical and NELM theories, Constant and Massey (2002) conducted a study on return migration among German guest workers and found support for both perspectives. The authors thus noted that migrants may be heterogeneous with regard to their migratory motivations and as such, there may not be one unitary process of return migration, but many. The relation between integration processes and return migration, according to de Haas, Fokkema, and Fihri (2009), is likely to depend on initial intentions for migrating, prospects at home and abroad, and educational, cultural, and other specific characteristics of immigrant groups.

Arguing that, for the neoclassical and NELM theories, the motivation for return is largely determined by financial or economic factors, the third approach, the structuralist theory posits that the decision to return is a social and contextual issue influenced by situational and structural factors (Cassarino 2004). These could determine the extent of impact returning migrants may have on their countries of origin. Underlying this principle is the recognition that the success or failure of returnees depends on the reality of the home economy and society and the expectations of the returnee (Cassarino 2004). Since it could be difficult for migrants to obtain all the necessary information about the social, economic and political changes that would have occurred in their home countries during their stay abroad (Gmelch 1980), upon return, migrants may encounter challenges reintegrating.

Due to the lack of opportunities for investments and employment in many countries of origin, returnees continue to suffer from high unemployment, political instability, and repression (de Haas 2006). It therefore seems useful for governments and other stakeholders of migrant-sending countries to provide support for returnees. As noted by the Commission of the European Communities (2002), countries of origin can facilitate a successful reintegration of return migrants, which is as well useful to the local society at large, by creating a favorable social, economic, and institutional environment for returnees.

Research methods and procedures

Research design

The research was based on a qualitative approach. This method is useful for the study because it is a form of systematic empirical investigation into meaning (Shank 2002). Also, the qualitative approach enables researchers to gain insight into participants’ settings, social processes, and allows for the development of rich and in-depth understanding of the community from the viewpoint of its members (Maxwell 2005; Strauss and Corbin 1999). By giving precedence to the voices of participants via their experiences, researchers develop a better understanding of individual and group experiences (Asimeng-Boahene 2013). The qualitative research methodology was
suitable for this study because it allowed the researcher to explore the thoughts, aspirations, expectations, and perceptions of final year students who had intentions of migrating abroad postgraduation.

Setting of the study
The study was conducted in a university in Ghana and the participants were recruited from four departments within the university. All participants were Ghanaian students from various regions of the country and belonged to different ethnic and religious groups. Ghana is a country located along the coast of West Africa and is a typical hot and humid tropical country with 10 administrative regions. It comprises of a large number of ethnic groups giving rise to a variety of subcultures in the country (Ardayfio-Schandorf 2005).

Participants and procedures
Thirty-four (16 males and 18 females) final year students (both undergraduate and graduate), who had the intention of migrating abroad postgraduation were purposively recruited as participants for the study. Focus group discussions (FGDs, n = 34) were conducted to gather data for the study. Focus groups were chosen as the appropriate method for obtaining information as they emphasize interaction among participants and can be analyzed to understand how participants co-construct their views by sharing and contesting knowledge (Lehoux, Poland, and Daudelin 2006). The discussions allowed participants to interpret key terms as well as agree and disagree with issues raised.

Furthermore, the interaction among group participants reduced the amount of contact between the facilitators and members of the focus groups, which decreased the influence of the facilitators over the interview process and gave a more prominent role to the participants’ opinions (Schulze and Angermeyer 2003; Madriz 2000). Participants were contacted by telephone, the purpose of the study described to them, an interview requested and conveniently scheduled for them. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality regarding the information they provided. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant and they were also asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire prior to commencement of each FGD.

Four mixed-sex FGDs were conducted. Two FGDs (FGD1, six males and four females; FGD2, six females and four males) consisted of students who had never traveled abroad and were aspiring to migrate to a developed country post-graduation. The other two FGDs (FGD3, four males and three females; FGD4, three females and four males) consisted of students who had previously traveled abroad, returned to Ghana and desired to migrate to a developed country postgraduation. Each FGD was conducted in English according to a set of open-ended guiding questions based on the objectives of the study; lasted approximately one hour and was led by a facilitator and co-facilitator.

The use of two facilitators for each FGD allowed for tracking and managing group dynamics, such as turn taking, engaging and managing quiet and dominant participants, respectively (Gibson and Mykitiuk 2012). The open-ended questions permitted participants to express themselves freely and enabled the researchers and participants to discuss emerging issues in much detail. Additionally, the data collection method made it possible for the researchers to probe participants’ responses for elaboration and to explore key issues raised by participants, which were useful for the study. All FGDs were audio taped.
and transcribed. The tape was replayed several times for the purpose of transcribing the data verbatim. After reading the transcripts, the responses were analyzed to identify emerging themes that addressed the objectives of the study. The most illustrative quotes were extracted and used to support important points that emerged.

Findings

Demographic characteristics of participants
All the participants were final year students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The participants were students of Social Work, Biochemistry, French and Linguistics Departments and their ages ranged from 22 to 34 years. While the ethnic background of participants was diverse, majority of them were Akans, who constitute the largest ethnic group in Ghana. With regard to the religious affiliation of participants, one person was a Moslem and the rest (33) were Christians. Some of the participants had previous travel experience to foreign countries to either visit family or for an educational exchange program covering one to six months. Significant themes that emerged from the FGDs in relation to the objectives of the study are discussed.

Pre-migrants’ countries of preference
Despite the fact that some of the participants had visited different foreign countries in the past, when asked about the countries they intended or planned to migrate to postgraduation, the majority of them mentioned Britain, Canada, and USA. They further provided various reasons underpinning their intentions to migrate to specific countries:

I would like to migrate to Britain because when I visited that country, I met a lot of migrants, especially Ghanaians who had good jobs … they earned good income and were happy. (Female graduate student with prior foreign travel experience)
I prefer America because I have heard that there are a lot of retirement homes for old people and they need individuals to work there for good income. With my first degree in social work, I think finding a job will be easy and I will be able to enjoy life … (Female undergraduate student with no prior foreign travel experience)
… Canada is well known for its social welfare system and as a student of Social Work that is one thing I would like to experience … I saw marvelous things in Sweden, but I want to migrate to Canada … (Male graduate student with prior foreign travel experience)

The findings indicate that many youth had plans to migrate to specific developed countries in order to find better paying jobs and enjoy a good life there. In the case of other participants, their family members at home and abroad influenced their choice of destination country as they noted:

America is the world because you can find everything there … although I have not been there yet, my relatives in Ghana and those in America want me to migrate there. They said America is so free, and I can go anywhere at any time since I will not face any restrictions … (Male graduate student with no prior foreign travel experience)
My family will sponsor my travel abroad so they will decide where I would go … I have many relatives who are residing in the US so my parents decided I should migrate there after graduation … they will help me find a job and accommodation and it will make life easy for me. (Female undergraduate student with no prior foreign travel experience)
Another factor that could influence pre-migrants’ choice of destination countries is language. While participants without prior foreign travel experience did not consider language as a factor, two female students who had prior foreign travel experience disclosed:

I will like to migrate to Britain or United States because when I visited Holland, they spoke Dutch and it was difficult for me to communicate with the people … I like to feel free when communicating with others.

I plan to migrate to Canada since it is a bilingual country; they speak both English and French. My first degree was in French and being a bilingual, it will be easier for me to get a job. I will have it easy moving around in the country.

The statements suggest that language is an important factor in migration decisions since it enables migrants to integrate in their countries of destination. Ability to speak the language of a country of destination is important because it could open doors for further studies and job opportunities. Living in a new country with a completely different language could be challenging for migrants in their quest to become integrated into new environments.

**Pre-migrants’ career plans in destination countries**

The participants expressed their desire to migrate abroad in order to advance their academic and professional careers. In terms of educational and job opportunities, almost all of the participants had similar aspirations. Some participants aimed to first pursue further studies and after graduation, look for a job since that could help them find better paying jobs:

I struggle to pay my fees, so pursuing a master’s degree in Ghana is not an option. Students apply for scholarships in foreign universities, especially in Canada and they get the opportunity to study there … I plan to do the same and look for a good job after I graduate with a master’s degree. (Female undergraduate student with no prior foreign travel experience)

I would like to migrate to Canada; I have heard and found on the internet that there are a lot of jobs there. I would like to work and further my education at the same time, this is difficult to do in Ghana.

I hope to find a job in the US and attend school at the same time. If I earn income, I will be able to pay tuition for a master’s program. After graduating with a master’s degree, I am sure better job opportunities will be available to me. 

Other participants had intentions to combine work with further studies when they migrate to the diaspora. This, according to them is difficult to do in Ghana because of the high unemployment rate compared to developed countries. Two male participants with no prior foreign travel experience recounted:

I would like to migrate to Canada; I have heard and found on the internet that there are a lot of jobs there. I would like to work and further my education at the same time, this is difficult to do in Ghana.

I plan to travel abroad in order to further my education, preferably in Canada. I would like to pursue a master’s degree in Social Work. After that, I will look for a job and settle there. (Male undergraduate student with no prior foreign travel experience)

I would like to migrate to Canada; I have heard and found on the internet that there are a lot of jobs there. I would like to work and further my education at the same time, this is difficult to do in Ghana.

I hope to find a job in the US and attend school at the same time. If I earn income, I will be able to pay tuition for a master’s program. After graduating with a master’s degree, I am sure better job opportunities will be available to me.
The responses indicate that majority of the participants had intentions to migrate to Canada and USA to pursue higher education and subsequently look for employment. With respect to pre-migrant youth who intend to further their studies as full-time students, they had hopes of doing so through scholarships. The aim of pursuing full-time or part-time graduate studies was to enhance their chances of finding better paying jobs and achieving their dreams of settling in the diaspora.

To return or not return

As evidence from research shows many migrants lead dual lives socially and economically by keeping families and other resources in their countries of origin while residing abroad, participants’ plans regarding their return to Ghana were explored. The majority of participants in this study indicated that they did not have plans of returning to their country of origin if they found jobs in destination countries:

Unemployment rate is very high in Ghana, even university graduates cannot get jobs … If I get the opportunity to travel abroad, I will not worry myself to return … what is important is to find a job and earn enough income that I can send some money home to my family. (Male graduate student with no prior foreign travel experience)

My plan is to find a job abroad and settle there... I do not have any intention of returning to Ghana. It will be better to help my younger sibling to join me there rather than returning to Ghana … maybe after so many years abroad, I will make a visit home. I have had enough of Ghana … (Female graduate student with no prior foreign travel experience)

Some participants stated that they would be compelled to return to Ghana or travel to other foreign countries if they are unable to secure jobs abroad:

If I experience difficulties, especially regarding securing a work permit, I will return to Ghana. I have not travelled abroad before but I have heard that in some countries there are constant immigration checks … if you don’t have legal documents to work, you would be deported. In that event, I will have no other choice than decide whether to return to Ghana or travel to another country, I will not wait for them to deport me. (Male graduate student with no prior foreign travel experience)

The best option for me if I do not find a good job abroad is to return to Ghana. I have my family here and I have a small business of my own... I will return to Ghana rather than to hassle abroad … if I get another chance, I will travel to another country. (Female graduate student with prior foreign travel experience)

Family influence was another factor that could influence participants’ decision to return home or not after migrating to the diaspora. In many African countries, such as Ghana, the decision to return or not is beyond the individual migrant because informal networks help migrants to finance their travel. Some participants affirmed this:

Family resources will be used to sponsor my travel … my family expects me to work hard and earn good income so that I can also sponsor my siblings to join me … if I return, my family members will be sad and angry at me … the best thing to do if my country of destination is not favorable is to strategize, explore conditions in other countries and move on. (Male undergraduate student with no prior foreign travel experience)

My family does not expect me to return to Ghana if I get the opportunity to travel abroad … they will support me financially to travel abroad with the expectations that I will be a successful resident … I do not have to return to Ghana, I can contact them via phone or
Skype … I have relatives who migrated abroad so many years ago … they send money home all the time. (Female graduate student with no prior foreign travel experience)

Moreover, for fear of stigma or shame from family and friends, some migrants prefer to continue to other countries if their expectations are not met in their original destinations. For example, some participants commented:

The major reason why I plan to migrate is to find a good job so that I can earn an adequate income. I will not return to Ghana, even if I do not find a job abroad. I will continue to struggle there because in Ghana, if a person travels abroad everybody in the neighborhood gets to know either through family or friends. When I return, initially my family will be happy, expecting that I would be going back after visiting. If I continue to stay in Ghana for more than two months, my family and neighbors will start asking questions and will put pressure on me to return … nobody will respect me in the community and life will be very difficult for me. (Male student with no prior foreign travel experience)

If things do not work out the way I expect, especially if I do not get a work permit that will enable me get a decent job, I will re-migrate to another country. I will not return to Ghana because of the stigma associated with unsuccessful migration … (Male student with no prior foreign travel experience)

The findings suggest that various reasons could influence pre-migrants’ decision to return or not return to their country of origin. However, the youth had intentions to migrate to the diaspora primarily for economic reasons. It is therefore not surprising they would not return to Ghana or would prefer to travel to another country if they were unable to achieve their goals.

**Discussion of the findings and conclusion**

Evidently, Canada, USA, and Britain were mostly preferred by the youth included in this study because of their developed economic and educational infrastructure. The preference for developed western countries does not come as a surprise because they are regarded by many people, especially educated youth in Ghana, as possible destination countries for economic and educational opportunities. While previous studies on intentions among young people by Elbadawy (2010) and Papapanagos and Sanfey (2001) found that males were more likely to consider migrating abroad, in this current study, gender differences were not found. According to the Human Development Report (United Nations Development Programme 2009), in recent times, about half of all international migrants are women. Since the early 1980s, increasing number of women who are often educated have been moving on their own to explore job and other opportunities abroad (Caritas Internationalis, n.d.).

Ghana has witnessed the emigration of people over the years and as a result, has a large diaspora in Europe and North America (Adaawen and Owusu 2013; Manuh 2006). Adepoju (2006) observed that the colonial system underpins current pattern of migration in Africa. For instance, European colonization of the African continent altered the forms of movement and these have been deeply rooted after independence as African economies have not broken the chains of colonization with Europe and America (Yaro 2008). The youth play a significant role because migration patterns in contemporary society are taking place in a time that industrialized nations need young migrants to fill vacancies within their aging labor force (Adsera, McLanahan, and Tienda 2013).
Migration research has established that interactions among social networks are usually an essential determinant of migration plans and the choice of destination country (Banerjee 1983). Social relationships, therefore, offer a form of capital that is associated with the place of destination, which considerably influence migration decisions (DaVanzo 1981). As Haug (2012) points out, the existence of social networks of immigrants at the place of destination prior to immigration could make migration easier by reducing the costs and risks of moving, among others. However, language barriers could present other difficulties for migrants, such as reading menus, finding their way round, and even recognizing their names when it is mentioned by residents of destination countries who may be unfamiliar with the pronunciation of their names (Cape 1999). Consequently, non-speakers of a country’s language can find themselves lonely in destination countries. Olsen (2000) contend that learning a foreign language is not a simple issue but is rooted in complex social and political dynamics that could assist migrants to escape ridicule and actively participate in their new societies.

As Adsera, McLanahan and Tienda (2013) suggest, and as affirmed by participants of this study, a large number of youth migrate to the diaspora as labor migrants. The expectation, therefore, is that jobs are readily available in their preferred countries. Nonetheless, this might be an illusion because migrants need to satisfy some documentation requirements, among others, before they can legally secure jobs. Also, to facilitate their integration into new destinations, migrants need educational qualifications from host countries, as well as adequate time, to understand the systems in these countries. Human capital is therefore a determining factor in migration decisions, as qualification level is linked to both the probability of finding a job and wage level in destination countries (Haug 2012).

Since most often, host educational credentials are worth more than those acquired in the immigrants’ country of origin, and are much better remunerated by employers in countries of destination (Wang and Lo 2005) many educated migrant youth pursue further studies in host countries. It is therefore a common practice among young migrants to be simultaneously involved in the labor market and in studies at institutions of higher learning (Tati 2010). In such instances, they find it difficult to find skilled jobs and are likely to engage in unskilled jobs that do not match their level of education, Tati (2010) notes. Student migrants working in casual jobs are not authorized to take up employment outside campus. For the majority of students who pursue further studies in universities abroad, especially those on scholarships, they are expected to return to their countries of origin after graduation. It is likely these students would become undocumented immigrants once they refuse to return.

Although reasons underpinning return cannot be easily categorized because they are context-dependent (Bastia 2011), in this study, the major reasons provided by participants were economic-related. The neoclassical theory suggests that if migrants’ expectations of higher earnings in their countries of destination do not become a reality it would result in a decision to return to their countries of origin (Cassarino 2004; Constant and Massey 2002). However, given that return could be viewed as a failed migration experience, some migrants who are unable to achieve their goals of earning higher incomes would be unwilling to return home, but rather travel to other foreign countries to explore opportunities there. This could be due to the fact that the unexpected and sudden return of these migrants would add pressure to the vulnerable situations in their families and communities at home (Oomen 2013). Return, therefore, is an option after a successful migration experience, where migrants are able to meet their goals of earning higher
incomes and accumulating savings during their stay in destination countries, the NELM
theory suggests (Makina 2012).

Despite the considerable influence of financial or economic factors, other factors could
influence migrants’ decision to return or not to their countries of origin. The findings
showed that some pre-migrants did not plan to return due to family pressure. Many families
expect migrants to settle abroad and remit money back home or assist other family members
to migrate abroad. This suggests that social networks influence the decision to migrate,
return, or circulate (Haug 2012). Besides, some of the pre-migrants included in this study, in
particular the males, did not have aspirations to return because of the stigma associated with
return migration. Challenges such as stigma, negative feelings of being a failed migrant,
and suffering identity conflicts are associated with return and reintegration and these have
gender implications (Gent and Black 2005; Caritas Internationalis, n.d.). In Ghana for
example, male returnees are likely to face these challenges due to high societal expectations
on them as economic providers of their families and as community icons of success. Since
return migration negatively affects the migrant, as well as his or her family, the structuralist
theory proposes that the decision to return is a social and contextual issue influenced by
situation factors (Cassarino 2004).

Indeed, similar to departure, return migration is a complex decision-making process that
involves different factors (Oomen 2013). It is important to emphasize that home countries
can benefit from the skills and experiences migrants acquire abroad, which is the opposite
of the usual brain drain argument (Dustmann and Weiss 2007). Nevertheless, if return is
involuntary and the socioeconomic environment in the home country is unfavorable, re-
emigration is likely to occur. In view of the fact that return migration could involve labor
migrants who were unable to reap the benefits of higher earnings abroad, it is crucial for
government to initiate policies that address the socioeconomic needs of return migrants,
especially the youth. Moreover, given that (1) return could be seen as a failed migration
experience with associated stigma and (2) many returnees are unprepared for the reverse
culture shock that often occurs when they return home (Willoughby and Henderson 2009) it
is essential for other stakeholders like social workers and immigration officers to provide
counseling and education aimed at protecting the personal, social, and psychological well-
being of return migrants.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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