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1	Article Title	<b>‘Unaccompanied’ Minors? Accompanied Foreign Minors, Families and New Technologies</b>	
2	Article Sub- Title		
3	Article Copyright - Year	<b>Springer Nature B.V. 2018 (This will be the copyright line in the final PDF)</b>	
4	Journal Name	Journal of International Migration and Integration	
5		Family Name	<b>Pérez</b>
6		Particle	
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21		Received	
22	Schedule	Revised	
23		Accepted	
24	Abstract	<p>This work aims to make apparent the importance of family, throughout the life trajectories of a group of young people whose very juridical designation—unaccompanied foreign minors—seems to preclude the possibility of recognising and appreciating such importance. Here, we present the results of an ethnographic and participatory research with ‘unaccompanied’ foreign minors in Bizkaia (Spain). By using our chosen methodology, we were able to understand how, with their currently transitory lifestyles as children in care, they fulfil their own social, emotional and identity needs, needs that the Social Care System alone is unable to meet. This study also shows how digital media cross all the social relations of these children. Digital media become an essential methodological tool for studying the daily life of young migrants.</p>	

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25	Keywords separated by ' - '	Mobile phones - Youth - Participatory research - Unaccompanied foreign minors - Family
26	Foot note information	

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**‘Unaccompanied’ Minors? Accompanied Foreign Minors, Families and New Technologies****KarmeLe Mendoza Pérez<sup>1</sup> · Marta Morgade Salgado<sup>2</sup>**

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**Abstract** This work aims to make apparent the importance of family, throughout the life trajectories of a group of young people whose very juridical designation—unaccompanied foreign minors—seems to preclude the possibility of recognising and appreciating such importance. Here, we present the results of an ethnographic and participatory research with ‘unaccompanied’ foreign minors in Bizkaia (Spain). By using our chosen methodology, we were able to understand how, with their currently transitory lifestyles as children in care, they fulfil their own social, emotional and identity needs, needs that the Social Care System alone is unable to meet. This study also shows how digital media cross all the social relations of these children. Digital media become an essential methodological tool for studying the daily life of young migrants.

**Keywords** Mobile phones · Youth · Participatory research · Unaccompanied foreign minors · Family

**Introduction**

In an era of continuous border crossings, which, in Spain and probably also in Europe generally, include those of minors travelling alone,<sup>1</sup> the families of these minors seem to

<sup>1</sup>In the USA, the number of unaccompanied children crossing the southern border rose by 78% in 2016 (source: Kids In Need of Defence—<https://supportkind.org/media/unaccompanied-children-crossing-southern-border-78-2016/>, page visited 5 Feb 2017).

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be of little or no relevance to the administrative authorities. Indeed, on arrival in Spain, or any other European country, these young people are labelled as ‘unaccompanied minors’. The assumption, use and diffusion of the term ‘unaccompanied’ both legislatively and in the scientific literature, obscures the possibility of contemplating more complex and global realities, such as the transnational relations that these minors maintain with their families in their countries of origin, or the relationships they enjoy with any family members who have migrated previously (Jiménez 2015). However, in this paper, we will question the status unaccompanied. With this in mind, we used general ethnographic methodology and, in particular, a series of workshops built around various artistic techniques that, from the very start, would invite the youngsters to be active and committed participants in the generation of material for analysis about their lives, which naturally included their concern for their family lives (Mendoza Pérez and Morgade Salgado 2016; Mendoza Pérez and Morgade Salgado 2018; Xiang and Toyota 2013).

The bureaucratic identification as an ‘unaccompanied foreign minor’ is not arbitrary but is the result of a whole legal and administrative logic that will determine these young people’s futures and migratory projects (Althusser 2006; Foucault 2002; Empez 2011). The different states involved in the migration of minors are aware of the challenges involved in caring for these youngsters (Vacchiano and Jiménez 2012; Jiménez 2016, 2017). For this reason, they have been involved in the creation of new legal-political strategies whose central objective is to redefine the idea of the migrant minor, as well as to manage the responsibility of the states as educators (Suárez-Navaz and Jiménez 2011). A review of these strategies shows that, today, the logic of the security of the receiving country prevails over the logic of the protection of the minors (Gimeno 2014a, 2015; Human Rights Watch 2002, 2009, 2010; Jiménez 2015, 2016, 2017). Consequently, as minors these children have all the rights recognised under the law, but as undocumented aliens the primary interest is their expulsion (Giménez and Suárez 2001). Thus, whilst they are entitled to the same rights as the national minors, in practice, the legal regulation of these children always hangs in the balance between protection and control (Jiménez 2015; Vacchiano and Jiménez 2012).

Moreover, if these minors really had the same rights as the national minors, the relationship between the minor, his/her family and the State would be resolved; however, the authorities prefer to act as if they had no family (Peris 2015). The rights of these youngsters are ignored, as are the recommendations of the psycho-pedagogical studies that highlight the importance of the family for the proper development of a child (Baldassar 2008; Baldassar and Merla 2013; Peris 2015). The few studies in Spain that have addressed the issue of the families of unaccompanied foreign minors, have also stressed the importance for the psychological stability of the child of taking their family into account (Quiroga et al. 2009; Markez and Pastor 2009; Ochoa de Alda et al. 2009).

This gives rise to an inconsistency between an administrative authority in the destination country and a family in the country of origin. The former attempts to fulfil a relational, economic, and affective role from a position of technological and cultural ‘advancement’, which considers the country of origin to be underdeveloped and technologically and culturally backward (Jiménez 2003). However, even though the Administration is expected to provide an artificial, family-like environment, encouraging the minor to use local public resources and interact within the system’s own institutionalised friendship networks (Palomares and Poveda 2010), it actually fails to do so. Meanwhile, and as we shall see, the family, which is denied the right to exercise its relational and

affective functions, exercises them in any case through the use of mobile phones 73  
(Baldassar 2008; Baldassar and Merla 2013; Madianou and Miller 2011). 74

## **Making Families Visible** 75

In Spain and also in Europe, the few studies that have looked in any depth at the 76  
families of these migrant minors have done so by employing a classical methodology 77  
based primarily on open interviews (Chavez and Menjívar 2010; Quiroga et al. 2009; 78  
Markez and Pastor 2009; Wernesjö 2014). Although the results emphasise the impor- 79  
tance of the family for the proper development of these young people, they say little 80  
about the familial relationships they maintain once they have entered the Care System 81  
(Peris 2015). As Peris (2015) points out, in researching something that is constantly 82  
rendered invisible and is rejected by the government, such as the relationship with the 83  
family, demands a high level of what in Spanish is termed *confianza*. This word 84  
translates both as 'confidence' (in this case, on the part of the young participants) 85  
and 'trust' (between the participants and the researchers (Dyrness 2008, p. 34). 86

Building a relationship of *confianza*, as in many other areas of social intervention, is 87  
a process that matures through information, transparency and the establishment of 88  
common goals (Peris 2015). It cannot exist if the minor feels unable to take ownership 89  
of their participation in the research process itself or, more specifically, if the young 90  
person suspects that an interest in identifying their family might lead to problems for 91  
themselves or indeed the family. 92

Given that these young migrants belong to groups that are criminalised and denied 93  
the right of expression, and in recognition of the responsibility inherent in the process 94  
of research, we opted for the use of a participatory methodology implemented through a 95  
series of workshops employing different artistic techniques that would allow the young 96  
people to develop a discourse about their realities collaboratively (Mendoza Pérez and 97  
Morgade Salgado 2018; Pink et al. 2010; Sansi 2015). As we will see, participating, 98  
through art, allowed the participants to explore and co-construct the issues that were to 99  
be the focus of our investigation, in an imaginative and personal way. 100

Thus, in this article, we will focus on how, through the excessive institutionalisation 101  
of this migratory phenomenon, family—especially in its role as a support network for 102  
the young migrant—has been devalued, negated and concealed (Mohanty 1988; Moore 103  
2011). In our case, the children themselves are demanding that the importance of their 104  
families in their life trajectories is acknowledged. However, the territorial logic of 105  
Social Care systems does not recognise an intrinsic characteristic of this type of 106  
migration: the family as a 'floating network'. Thus, based on our own idea of 107  
co-construction of knowledge and of making the perspective of the participants visible, in 108  
this article, we will outline specific participatory and artistic techniques as means of 109  
exploring and representing the perspectives of five unaccompanied foreign minors 110  
taken in by the province of Bizkaia, Spain (Punch 2002; Wernesjö 2014). 111

## **Background and Study Design** 112

In the following sections, we present the background to the study and the justification 113  
for the methodology of the ethnographic and participatory research we conducted, 114

which has allowed us to understand and appreciate the importance in the life trajectories 115  
of these young migrants of the families they left behind. We also detail how and where 116  
the various audio-visual techniques were brought into play to facilitate the co-construction 117  
of meanings, which brought to light their hitherto invisible families (Mitchell 2011; 118  
Moore 2011). We will describe the setting, participants, methods, informed consent 119  
and the workshops in turn. 120  
121

## Setting 122

In this paper, we propose to inquire into the daily realities of a group of migrant minors 123  
residing in a Children's Care Centre in the province of Bizkaia (Spain). With the 124  
increase in numbers of young people in this situation since the year 2000, it is an issue 125  
that has taken on increasing importance for social services, both in Spain and in the rest 126  
of Europe (Gimeno 2014a; b; Westwood 2012). 127

Although, geographically speaking, Bizkaia is one of the provinces furthest from 128  
Spain's southern border, it is the primary point of entry for these minors. Within the 129  
Spanish state, it is one of the main provinces in which they settle or seek transit to the 130  
rest of Europe (Arartekoa 2014; Mendoza Pérez and Belarra 2015). The majority of 131  
unaccompanied foreign minors in Bizkaia comprise male teenagers, aged 15 to 17, 132  
from Morocco (80%), Algeria (9%) and West Africa (11%). 133

The Care Centre, *Urrun*,<sup>2</sup> where the research was conducted, is located quite a distance 134  
from the city centre in Bilbao, in an outlying rural area and it is divided into five sections, 135  
each catering for around 12 minors with 7 carers<sup>3</sup> working shifts. 136

## Participants 137

Due to the nature of the centre, many participants in the study left the establishment 138  
before the research was completed or entered after the ethnography had begun. Thus, in 139  
Table 1, we list the participants who took part in the workshops outlined in later sections 140  
and whose profiles we were able to establish during the course of our study. 141

## Methods 142

The first author of the paper did her ethnographic research in a Residential Centre for 143  
Unaccompanied Foreign Minors, between January 2015 and June 2015 (6 months). We 144  
were aware of the limitations of certain data gathering techniques—such as conventional 145  
interviews and observation—for researching on the family (Mendoza Pérez and 146  
Morgade Salgado 2016; Punch 2002). Thus, besides the fieldwork carried out, we 147  
organised a series of workshops. We designed the workshops with the intention of 148  
creating a useful tool to understand the social worlds of the migrant minors in their own 149  
terms, providing strategies and tools that would promote the democratisation of the 150

<sup>2</sup> We use this pseudonym, which in Euskera, the language of the Basque Country, means 'far away', for the residential juvenile facility. The names of the participants are also pseudonyms, in order to protect their identity.

<sup>3</sup> In Spain, the word 'educator' (educador) is used to describe this profession.

**Table 1** Chart showing those participants most cited in the results

Participant's pseudonym	Origin	Time in care on reaching age of majority	Family situation in Morocco	Family in Spain	Family in Europe
t1.1					
t1.3	Tangier (Morocco)	+ 4 years	Oldest of 3 siblings. Both parents living	Extended family: uncles and aunts in Algeciras, with whom holidays spent, and in Barcelona	Extended family: uncle and aunt in Belgium
t1.4	Casablanca (Morocco)	+ 4 years	Family with 5 siblings	No	Nuclear family, brother in Italy
t1.5	Tangier (Morocco)	+ 4 years	Youngest of 8 siblings. Mother died in childbirth so raised by his aunt.	Nuclear family: brother; extended: cousin in Bilbao	No
t1.6	Kenitra (Morocco)	Nearly 4 years	Family of 4 siblings	Extended family in Málaga	Nuclear family: 2 siblings in Europe
t1.7	Beni Melal (Morocco)	Nearly 5 years	Lost his father: 6 siblings	Nuclear family: sister in Almería. Extended family: uncle, aunt and cousin in Bilbao (Bizkaia) and in Vitoria (Araba)	Extended family in England

research, that is, that would encourage the genuine participation and transformation of the groups involved in the research (Dyrness 2008; Morgade and Müller 2015).

## Informed Consent

When dealing with minors who are under the Child Protection System, firstly, permission to carry out our research was sought from the Provincial Council of Bizkaia, the body responsible for the guardianship of these minors. Since responsibility for the protection of these minors is outsourced to a number of external services, once in the field, we also asked permission of the religious entity that administrated the juvenile centre in order to carry out the workshops. Likewise, the workshops were presented to the educational team of the module in which most of participating children were housed, in one of its formal meetings. A similar presentation was given informally to the coordinator of another module in which one of the minors was housed.

Once all permissions were obtained from the relevant adults, and in order to protect the type of relationship that we aimed to establish with our co-investigators, we took careful steps over the way in which we invited the minors participate. The aim of the workshop was to create a space in which the dialogical relationship between the researchers and the participants would be privileged in a way that would enable a co-construction of different ways of understanding the world.

We employed a 'visual' approach to informed consent (see Annex I), in order to make it more accessible to the participants (Mitchell 2011). However, informed consent goes beyond being an appropriate and understandable role for participants, it has to be a dynamic and continuous process throughout the research, involving dialogue and negotiation with those involved in the study.

Likewise, we discussed what would happen to the data and the products generated once the workshops were over. We concluded that the product output was of shared authorship, that is, they belonged to the group, and therefore permission was to be requested each time they were displayed or published.

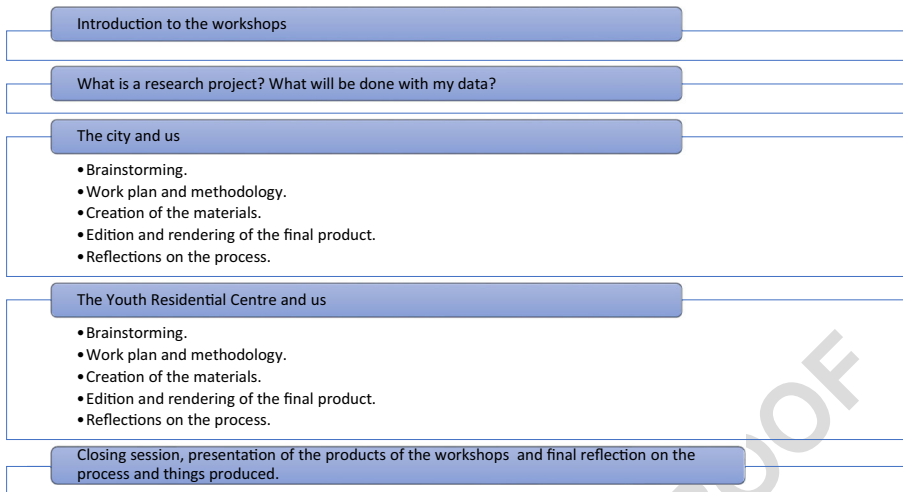
## Procedure

The workshops took place between 26 March and 4 June 2015 chiefly in a space donated by the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, with the participation of five minors, two students of social integration and the first author of this paper. In this space, we organised 12 sessions, one weekly 2-h session, to which we attached five sessions of filming and photography in the streets of Bilbao and in the juvenile centre. The experience was divided into five main parts (see Fig. 1):

Beyond the final products of the workshops (a 16-min documentary showing life in the city centre and maps of the cities of Bilbao and Tangier, sites of their daily practices), the process itself (how things were made, the material chosen or rejected as part of the final product etc.) was vital to an understanding of the meanings of such products. Thus, all workshop sessions were recorded and later transcribed, and addition of field notes were taken after each session. Furthermore, all pictures and videos produced by participants were filed together with the notes taken by the researcher on how they were recorded.

In analysing the data and to ensure their quality and validity in confirming the importance of the family in the life trajectories of these young people, we carried out a





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**Fig. 1** Structure of the workshops

triangulation through the use of several methods, including: participant observation, 194  
 visual methods, transcripts of the workshop sessions, notes from informal discussions 195  
 with the minors and social workers and informal chats on social networks (WhatsApp), 196  
 which were included in the Field Diary. 197

## Results 198

It is vital to understand the complexity of meanings that these children construct in their 199  
 spaces of transnational mobility, because these trajectories take them far from what the Social 200  
 Services might envisage. Thus, this migratory movement involves scenarios and actors that 201  
 go beyond those contemplated by the Administration (Gimeno 2014b, 2015). However, the 202  
 role of the family—both nuclear and extended—is blurred within the protocols of the Care 203  
 System. Even though the presence of the family back home, along with any family in the 204  
 destination country, is traced by the Administration from the start of their journey to 205  
 reception, this information is not sought in response to any intention to integrate families 206  
 transnationally into the trajectories of the minors in question. Rather, it responds to an 207  
 administrative requirement, or relates to the necessary steps to ‘regularise’ the child’s 208  
 residence status, or possibly to determine the *use* they make of the system (Gimeno 2014b). 209

Despite the fact that the territorial vision of the Care System hides the transnational 210  
 dimension of the family and thanks to the methodology we employed, in what follows we 211  
 will see how family plays an important role in the socialisation of young migrants, 212  
 maintaining the relational and emotional roles that the institution is unable to provide for 213  
 them. Thus, in the course of this article, these five young migrants and their families will 214  
 transport us to new transnational realities, through which we will understand that, although 215  
 the migratory act fragments the family unit, the familial bonds and relationships do not 216  
 disappear (Pedone 2007, p. 91). 217

As we will see, these children have complex roles within their families back home. 218  
 They have to negotiate their own desires in the context of the expectations, hopes and 219

aspirations that stem from their family connections (Gimeno 2014a; b; Vacchiano and Jiménez 2012). For its part, the family adjusts to times and contexts that are discontinuous, wherein, thanks to new technologies, time and space are organised in such a way that they connect presence and absence. As we will see, these days, new technologies are fundamental tools for maintaining the cohesion of extended families and the values of people's own culture (Madianou and Miller 2011).

### **(Un)accompanied Minors**

The authorities realise that minors are not necessarily alone during their migratory trajectory and that in many cases they are children with a younger or older sibling, or perhaps an adult (e.g. an uncle, cousin, neighbour, family friend) who acts as a point of reference for the minor (Gimeno 2014b; Jiménez 2003). However, since the path of access to the Care System involves a declaration of being unaccompanied, the authorities act as if they had no family (Peris 2015, p. 570). The family is not so much hidden but, rather, ignored (Moore 2011). At the same time, some minors will choose to hide the existence of any family in the destination country in order to circumvent the system and avoid the possible consequences of such a declaration.

*Excerpt 1:* Notes from the Workshop Field Diary of Karmele Mendoza, 3 March 2015

A Vocational Trainer tells me that one of the minors in her group has a brother living in Santurce, but does not want anyone to know. She explains that only she and her friends in the Centre know.

*Excerpt 2:* Transcription of some footage filmed during the workshop that was not selected by the participants to be part of the documentary produced

Rayan is talking about his journey and how he decided to stay in Spain. I didn't know anyone here [Bilbao]. I have uncles and cousins in Barcelona and they told me about this [Spain]. I decided not to stay with them there [Barcelona] either, I preferred to come here [Bilbao] to live on my own [sic].

As we see, in some cases, having family in the destination country influences the decision making of children who might decide to go to a certain city because they have family there or, in other cases, prefer to avoid the city where they have family living. However, this information is concealed because the person seeking assistance will tend to play out the role understood to favour the acquisition of greater benefits in the host society (Peris 2015). In the present case, youngsters know that declaring themselves to be without any family will gain them legal regularisation (a residence permit).

Sometimes ties between minors in Social Care and their families can be exploited. So, for example, the Residential Centre might allow the child to have sporadic telephone contact with the nuclear family back home or will permit weekends and/or holidays to be spent with any nuclear family declared to be in the place of destination. Whether either of these privileges is made available to the children depends on their behaviour, and they might be withdrawn if they are to be punished or in case of other

incidents (Ramos-Espejo 2015). It is evident that the threat of withholding the right to contact with the family is used by the administration and management of these juvenile facilities as a punishment or to maintain control, and that the intrinsic value of the family as a point of reference in the trajectories of the minors in their care is not recognised (Ramos-Espejo 2015).

Regardless of whether or not they are acknowledge as having family in the autonomous community in which they live, the family in all its forms remains part of their everyday lives, either in being present in their hopes and desires, or in the decorations of their rooms and/or in the processes of socialisation in which they are engaged as young urban people.

Thus, the desire to visit the family back home does not go away regardless of its impossibility and this is something they represented in the maps they drew—where, as well as drawing places they pass through in Bilbao, they decided to add a map of their hometown, Tangier—because, as Rayan said: ‘that is where my family lives and where I want to go to visit them’. Rayan and Mouad made a map of the places they frequented in Tangier when they lived there. Mouad also added current photos of his cousins dressed as Ultra Hercules practising football, because that is what he used to do himself (Fig. 2).

As we see, the family back home is something the child misses badly but is not allowed to visit. Often, this impossibility is not understood:

*Excerpt 3* Notes from the Field Diary of Karmele Mendoza, 10 March 2015

Mohammed [15 years old, three and a half years in Spain. Moroccan] asks one of the carers why he can't ask for permission for a week's vacation to go to see his family in Morocco. The carer replies that Mohammed knows full well, because he is better off here than with his family.

Regardless of the impossibility of visiting them, the family as a ‘floating social network’ does not vanish but is embodied in memories. They, like the affective-emotional baggage that Bargach (2008) speaks of, are present in the form of the decorations in their rooms (when permitted by the juvenile facility and/or carers) and in the photo albums stored on their mobiles (Fig. 3): This affective charge also became visible during the filming. Rayan was shooting a scene in which he talked about his family when his voice broke off and he fell silent for a moment and asked us to stop filming. After a few seconds, he resumed filming and continued to talk about his journey and his family.



**Fig. 2** Rayan and Mouad's map of Tangier. Note: Image taken from the maps made in the workshops



**Fig. 3** Scene taken from the documentary. Note: Rayan shows his room and the side of the wardrobe where he keeps pictures of his whole family. He introduces them in the documentary

Just as the family back home is present, any family in Spain similarly influences the socialisation process of these youngsters. This is something also observed in the maps drawn by some of them, where some of the routes delineated in the city were associated with different family members (Fig. 4): In the case of the *Urrun* residence, this negation of the family in the minor's education process can result in paradoxical situations. Since the *Urrun* residence for minors is a religious entity and as such would typically see *family* as an important institution, it might be expected to provide a familial environment. However, rather than involving the real family, it tries to create an artificial substitute by instituting a session called 'family reunions'. These are meetings that take place every Thursday after dinner. This space, originally intended to generate a family-style relationship between educators and youngsters through which the latter can recount what has happened to them during the week, in fact tends to have the opposite effect, distancing the children yet further from their teachers. This is because the way the educators speak often serves only to remind the young people that *this is not their home*.

Family and Media: Iwalida<sup>4</sup> I miss you so much.

The family as a 'floating network' is embodied in memories that are present in the photo albums they store on their mobiles:

*Excerpt 4* Notes from the Workshop Field Diary of Karmele Mendoza, 23 April 2015

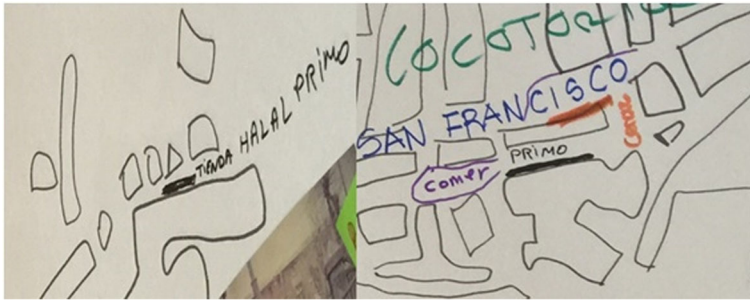
After a filming session, we sat down to chat for a bit, Mouad took out his mobile and showed me a photo, telling me that it was his mother, but that he never knew her because she died giving birth to him. He told me that he was brought up by his aunt and that she was like a mother to him.

For the family at home, the child is similarly always kept in mind (Empez 2011) and, so that the young person is familiar with what is going on back home, they will send photos of important family events. Thus, the family album stored on the children's mobiles continues to grow:

*Excerpt 5* Notes from the Field Diary of Karmele Mendoza, 3 March 2015

I sat down with Rayan in the courtyard at the centre to chat. After talking for a while, he took out his phone and showed me some pictures of his family. Then he showed me some of a baby and told me it was a little boy that his cousin had had a week ago.

<sup>4</sup> 'Iwalida' means 'mother' in Arabic.



**Fig. 4** Map of Bilbao. Two fragments of areas in Bilbao. Note: In black, Djamal shows those parts of the city he frequents, either because his cousin has a business there or because he can see his cousin. In green, Omar (supposedly 16 years old) marks in the words 'Call Centre' (Locutorio) because it is there in San Francisco St. that he goes to ring his family

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Thus, within the organisation, by using their mobiles to join what is present with what is absent, distance and time are no longer barriers to daily life within these transnational families. Both parties use their mobiles to maintain family ties, either by calling or writing and/or exchanging photos. Also, references to the family through profile pictures and regular status updates on WhatsApp are constant. Many of these are not only aimed at mothers but also benefit cousins or nephews (Fig. 5): This type of practice generates a digital link that simulates the joint presence of the two parties, contrary with reality (Horst et al. 2010, p. 51). So, by the use of mobile phones and the Internet, these minors escape the dominant territorial logic imposed by the administration, creating and maintaining relationships and activities that are built in discontinuous and non-territorial spaces.

In addition, there are also minors who prefer not to call their families too frequently since this can sometimes occasion an emotional burden they find hard to cope with. I recall one teenager who explained to me that he did not like to call his mother on Skype because he would see her cry. He preferred to call her on the telephone and keep the conversations



**Fig. 5** The WhatsApp statuses of Djamal and Yassine. Note: From top to bottom: in the first status, we see the phrase 'I love you lots' linked to the profile picture in which this young Moroccan's nephews appear. The following two statuses are both from Yassine and are addressed to his mother—firstly: 'My eyes are brimming with my longing to see you Iwalida. I miss you so much' ('Iwalida' means mother in Arabic); and then (in French): 'Mum comes first'



as short as possible. In this case, the emotional ties were kept alive in other ways and  
whenever she knew someone would be travelling to Bilbao his mother would send across  
gifts of underwear and traditional sweets. Similarly, in fieldwork, we were able to observe  
different situations in which the family, though far away, was actively present:

*Excerpt 6* Notes from the Field Diary of Karnele Mendoza, 22 July 2015

I met one of the workshop participants, Yassine, in the street in Bilbao. I commented  
that he was wearing a very modern tracksuit; he explained that his mother sent it  
over from Morocco and how she managed to send it. Then he asked me if I liked the  
tracksuit. Over the following days, his profile pictures on WhatsApp vary, but he is  
always wearing the tracksuit

### The Unseen Presence of a Watchful Eye

The methodology employed in this investigation has been very useful when it comes to  
making visible the role that family, both back home and in the destination country, plays in  
the practices and socialisation processes of these youths in the different phases of their  
migration project. Thus, in the first minutes of the documentary produced, the protagonist  
recounts his journey to Spain and why he decided to stay there. Here we can see that the  
family does not share the journey, although this is not a problem. In addition, the youngster  
speaks of another way of getting into Spain that is far from the typical public image of  
'pateras'<sup>5</sup> and the undercarriages of trucks.<sup>6</sup>

*Excerpt 7* Transcription and two scenes from the documentary produced by partic-  
ipants to describe life in the juvenile centre

We came here on holiday, to wander around and that, you know. And I decided to  
stay here because I liked the place. Well, I decided to stay here, and that's it. And  
when I came up here [Spain] I told my father I wanted to stay. Well, it was hard to  
talk my father round to let me stay here. My mother too.

This anecdote shows us how complex and diverse family relationships can be, and how  
some caring parents remain ever close, occasionally helping to reduce the personal risks and  
costs of the migration project (Gimeno 2014b; Vacchiano and Jiménez 2012). Thus, the family  
in Spain tries to minimise the migratory risks during and after the young person's period in  
social care. In the following case, this is done by facilitating the arrival of the child at the centre:

*Excerpt 8* Notes from Workshop of Karnele Mendoza, 7 May 2014

In the case of Djamal, when I asked him how he managed to get to Bilbao he told me  
that a family member picked him up and brought him by car as far as Bilbao (Informal  
chat on the way to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, where we conducted a workshop).

<sup>5</sup> Small boats used to smuggle illegal migrants.

<sup>6</sup> Although this is not the typical manner in which this group enters Spain, we consider that this type of entry method is the result of a tightening of the borders, which has generated multiple forms of irregular migration, rather than any conscious intention to take advantage of the Social Care Systems as has often been alleged. Clearly, putting up barriers to human mobility does not curtail the phenomenon, but rather will tend to generate alternative means to achieve mobility.

So, these actors become more visible when the young person comes of age or when he or she rejects or decides to ignore the bureaucratic logic of the notion of 'unaccompanied'.  
*Excerpt 9* Notes from Karmele Mendoza of a WhatsApp conversation with Rayan,  
 15 June 2015

I had already completed the fieldwork, but still maintained contact with the participants from the workshops. One day, I asked Rayan, on WhatsApp, how he was and he told me that he was sick of that hole [the juvenile facility] and said he was considering leaving.

Today, they have all reached legal adulthood and their families, both in their countries of origin and destination, continue to ensure that their children's migration projects go ahead as safely as possible. As an example, Djamal having been evicted from a flat for those formerly in care in which he lived, after several months relying on the hospitality of friends, decided to move to his sister's in Almeria (in Andalucía, southern Spain), where he knew he would easily find temporary or seasonal work. Yassine is actually living in Italy with his older brother and comes to Spain just to visit friends. Mouad lives in a village in Bizkaia (Basque Country, Spain) with his older brother, who also came as an unaccompanied minor more than 15 years ago.

Although these young people started their trips independently, to some extent they continue to be dependent on their families. Thus, the family, though it may sometimes present itself in rather peculiar ways, supports the child emotionally and in other ways throughout his/her migratory project, largely through the medium of new technologies. In sociological terms, we can say that, in terms of capital, family is of paramount importance for irregular migrants (Van Meeteren et al. 2009).

## Discussion and Conclusions

As we have seen, the family situation of these children, as a consequence of the political and ideological construction unaccompanied, is a blurred space rarely presented by minors to the social services in host countries, and not taken into account by the authorities, who intervene as if they had no family. However, through a participatory methodology in which five young people took ownership of the research, we have shown that most of the minors studied made their migration trips with their family's agreement and that they remain in regular, almost daily, touch with their families through new information and communication technologies (Madianou and Miller 2011; Mendoza Pérez 2016, 2017).

These young people do not fit, nor want to fit, a hegemonic and territorial image of the family, and they oblige us to take on board new realities in which families can also be transnational (Aguilar 2013). Therefore, to continue to ignore the importance of family, both in migratory patterns and in the socialisation of these minors, is to deny these realities. But it also means continuing to turn our backs on psycho-pedagogical and ethical claims that stress the importance of families and the difficulty of substituting for them when it comes to providing a pastoral education that develops the skills children need to be part of society (Boccagni 2010; Herrera 2004; Medina 2010).

In addition, the data presented show new combinations of dependencies and autonomies that make it necessary to reformulate the links between the minors, their families

and the State in order to put an end to the two pairings, child-family and child-Care System (Boccagni 2010; Peris 2015). Thus, in the light of the fact that, in 2015, 88,300 asylum seekers applying for international protection in the Member States of the European Union (EU) were considered to be unaccompanied minors while, over the period 2008–2013, their number stood between 11,000 and 13,000,<sup>7</sup> it might be worth reformulating the premises usually implicit in how we consider the unaccompanied minor as a juridical and sociological subject (Suárez-Navaz and Jiménez 2011).

To initiate such a reformulation involves placing on hold the political and ideological construction, so far from any scientific logic, on which interventions are based, to look for new alternatives that respect and are sensitive to the complex realities of these young people (Boccagni 2010; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Jiménez 2015; Montesino Parra and Jiménez 2015). To meet these realities and based upon the best interests of the minor, Peris (2015) proposes a formula of Shared Transnational Guardianship (STG), aimed at Unaccompanied Foreign Minors who are economic migrants.

The STG would involve a two-way and dialogical collaboration between Social Services in the destination country and family in the country of origin for the improvement of the child's well-being through agreement, where possible, between all parties. Unlike the current model of guardianship, the STG would involve a transnational collaboration between the Social Services in the young person's country of arrival and the family in their country of origin, making space for a form of decentralised cooperation, a system that places the minor at the centre (Family—Minor—Social Care System).

In short, the STG would make it possible to make visible something so sought after by our participants: the role of the family, given that this accepts and encourages the preservation of the relationships pre-established in the country of origin, thanks, as we have seen, to communication technology. Likewise, it assumes, without criminalising, that these youngsters might have relatives in the destination country. In other words, it respects and fosters the idea of being from here and being from there (Empez 2011; Peris 2015).

In addition, this type of guardianship would allow the reincorporation of the family in the educational projects of the minor, as Mendoza Pérez and Belarra (2015, p. 230) call for. But more than that, it would offer the possibility of fulfilling the much longed-for wishes of these young people: to enjoy short visits to their country of origin. At the same time, the Care System would be freed from the impossible task of replacing the affective role of the family of children in care. Along similar lines, in Tangier, the Al Khaima Association also proposes the creation of a transnational mediation and suitable mechanisms for the promotion of a psycho-socio-educational intervention that includes the family of children within care systems (Jiménez 2015; Montesino Parra and Jiménez 2015).

Although there are few studies on this subject, there are possible alternatives that respect the human rights of so-called unaccompanied minors and their families, in the current era of continuous border crossings where minors are involved. It only remains to apply, on both sides, the theoretical advances that are being made in this area in order to achieve policies, legislation and professionals who understand the family of the unaccompanied minor as an ally, as an opportunity for co-operative development rather than as an intrusion that threatens the hegemony of the nation-state.

<sup>7</sup> Data taken from Eurostat on 2 May 2016.



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