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Who Are the "Unskilled," Really?

Rafael was born in Leon, a large industrial city with a population of over one million in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico, known primarily for its leather, footwear, and textile industries.[1] Typical of many young men in the area, Rafael left school at age 15 and found an entry-level position in a manufacturing firm that produces men's clothing. Through observation and informal training from coworkers, he learned to operate and repair the industrial sewing machines that stitch men's garments. Rafael readily transferred these technical skills to his second job in Leon, where he also worked as a machinist, this time in a factory that manufactured nurses' uniforms. After a year in his second job, he was promoted to supervisor, but without the promised salary increase.

With opportunities for higher earnings limited at the plant, Rafael decided to try his luck in the United States and took the risk of migrating without authorization to Los Angeles, where he had friends and family. He applied for a job as a machinist in a manufacturing firm that produces textile covers for musical

instruments. After showing the supervisor that he could operate the machines on the floor, he was hired on the spot. Rafael worked at the plant as a machinist for two years, acquiring new skills and seeing his wages increase from $7 to $14 per hour. In addition to working with industrial sewing machines, Rafael operated and repaired manual sewing equipment, learned new designs, and worked with different types of textiles, from velvet to nylon to canvas. Armed with his new skills and targeted savings, he returned to Leon in 2008 and, once resettled, used his remitted savings to start a small tailoring business, carving a new economic niche for himself in a textile and leather industry that traditionally produces shoes, belts, boots, and purses. Today, Rafael and his two employees stitch men's garments, velvet covers for musical instruments, and nylon backpacks, using tailoring and machinist repair skills that he developed on the job in Los Angeles.

Lalo was born and reared in a small rancho of less than two thousand inhabitants outside of Irapuato, Guanajuato. The community, Alajuela, has an established history of outmigration to the United States and a sizeable number of return migrants who have retired in the community. At the early age of eight he left school to help his father farm their land; at the age of 18, he found an entry-level position at a nearby General Motors auto plant, where he went through a six-month training program before being assigned to the production line. Frustrated with the repetitive nature of the work and seeking adventure, after two years he decided to migrate to the United States, to Georgia, where he had friends working in chicken processing and carpet manufacturing. After trying similarly repetitive work in a line job at the carpet factory, he located an apprentice position with a master

carpenter through a friend. Lalo loved this work and admired the craftsmanship of his mentor, whom he calls el Romano (a Mexican American man). El Romano taught Lalo everything about woodworking, and Lalo became a master carpenter in the process. Together they laid floors and designed and built cabinetry and custom-made furniture. Lalo traveled home to Mexico regularly, which enabled him to maintain strong linkages with families and households in his hometown and assess changing economic opportunities in the community.

After four years of working under the guidance of el Romano, Lalo was prepared to return home for good, driving a white Ford truck filled with carpentry tools he had purchased in the United States. Taking advantage of a program launched by the local government to harness the resources and skills of return migrants, Lalo enrolled in a "*programa incubador de empresas*" (a program to incubate new businesses) in order to follow in the entrepreneurial steps of el Romano, who "works hard and is disciplined." Upon completion of the six-month course, Lalo used his savings to open a woodworking business that provides housing and U.S.-style cabinets to the return migrants living in the community. He hired five ex-migrants, choosing them because "they work hard." Like Rafael, Lalo used his new entrepreneurial and technical skills to train his employees and carve a new niche in the local economy, one driven by return migrants who desire U.S. building styles.

Anna, aged 35, grew up in the *municipio* of San Miguel de Allende, a picturesque colonial town and home to tens of thousands of expatriate Americans. At age 15, she left school and found a job cleaning apartments. Several years later, through a friend, she found a job working as a receptionist in a hotel owned

and operated by an American. In 1996, after two years on the job, an American woman approached Anna and asked if she would return to Manhattan with her and care for her children. Seeking adventure and opportunity Anna agreed and so worked as a live-in domestic and child caregiver for four years. In 2000, she left her first employer because she no longer wanted a live-in position; she wanted her own apartment and she wanted "freedom." Anna found a day job as a nanny for two small children and increased her salary from $350 to $450 a week. In this job, she learned how to clean with new technology, care for the children, and navigate public transportation; she also improved her English and developed interpersonal skills that she applied when interacting with her employers. By performing these multiple tasks, she developed a set of management skills.

Anna regularly sent her earnings to her mother in San Miguel de Allende, who used them to build a house for her family. When the house was completed, Anna returned home to San Miguel de Allende. Her English skills helped her land her first job upon return as a salesperson at a mailbox company that ships items abroad for the expatriate community. After marrying and giving birth to her first child, she left this job and found part-time work as a sales manager in a high-end store that sells handcrafted furniture to Americans living in Mexico and tourists. In the shop where one of the authors purchased some patio furniture, she mentioned that she earns 200 pesos more a week than her nonimmigrant counterparts because of her social and management skills and English language proficiency, skill sets she had learned on the job as a domestic and nanny.

Although Rafael, Lalo, and Anna have distinctive migration histories, the three share labor market experiences that are typical

of many Mexican return migrants with low levels of education. They leave school at a young age and find entry-level positions in the various industries that characterize the country's local economies. The on-the-job, tacit skills they learn offer some occupational mobility, but for the most part opportunities for job advancement and higher wages are limited. Some migrate to the United States for higher wages, some leave because of economic dislocations, others for occupational advancement, and still others for adventure or to improve their skills. Once in the United States, many migrants achieve these goals by mobilizing the skills they had acquired in Mexico and learning new ones. Rafael was able to apply his machinist skills from the garment factory floor in Leon to his manufacturing job in Los Angeles, and he was rewarded for these skills with higher wages. It is probable that the tactful people skills learned in her job as a receptionist in a San Miguel de Allende hotel made Anna a good candidate for a live-in domestic in Manhattan. Similarly, Lalo's knowledge of how a General Motors assembly line functions would have facilitated his learning an assembly line position in Georgia's carpet industry. Both Lalo and Anna also acquired new skills in the United States, including woodworking and English language proficiency that provided economic gains and advancement.

When they return home, migrants often achieve wage growth and occupational mobility by applying their new skill sets they have acquired abroad, in the process diversifying local economies and introducing new techniques and approaches to work. Some female return migrants, like Anna, are able to bypass domestic work and enter the sales workforce because of the English language and customer service skills they have learned in the United States. As the case of Anna demonstrates, speaking English opens employment prospects in industries such as

tourism where this language is the primary language of communication. In the process, these skill transfers introduce new customer-service approaches to the social organization of work. Some, like Rafael and Lalo, optimize their time abroad to achieve specific migration goals, accumulating new skills, work experiences, and enough earnings to start their own businesses. Returnees such as Lalo and Rafael see themselves as innovators, or what Francesco Cerase calls "carriers of change," because their entrepreneurial activities can trigger development and diversify local economies.[2] In the case of Lalo, part of this diversification in his hometown of Alajuela is made possible because of a migrant-driven economy that thrives on transferred skills. Indeed, Lalo's success is in part dependent on the consumer tastes and preferred housing styles of return migrants, but his ability to transfer entrepreneurial skills from the United States also changed his approach to organizing work practices.[3] And, as in the case of Lalo, a migrant-driven economy facilitated the transfer of Anna's skills to Mexico. What makes Anna's case particularly interesting is that the migrants driving the San Miguel de Allende economy and the transfer of her English skills are expatriate Americans, not Mexican return migrants.

As these case narratives show, Rafael, Lalo, and Anna acquired significant skills that they converted into genuine economic gains and opportunities for themselves and the communities to which they returned. In the United States, however, these workers are often perceived as "unskilled" by virtue of the jobs they do because these jobs are shunned by most native workers, who think of them as low in social status—as jobs that only migrants do. The empirical literature on migrant human capital skills and labor market adjustments does not stray very far from this public perception. Most researchers, because of data constraints,

rely primarily on the formal institutional settings that produce measurable proxies for human capital, including schooling, professional training, and host country language skills.[4] According to this literature, Anna, Lalo, and Rafael would be most likely classified as "low skilled" by virtue of the low levels of education and formal credentials they brought with them from Mexico or acquired in the United States. Yet, as their labor market and migration histories reveal, their investment in other forms of human capital at home and abroad was substantial, and we can see that obviously far from being unskilled or low skilled, as the literature simplifies, they brought with them to the United States an eagerness and capacity to learn that increased their abilities to earn. Lalo and Anna not only learned English but also other cultural skill sets such as new ways of interacting with customers and approaching work, tacit skills that often go unrecognized by scholars but play a crucial role in the labor process and mobility of migrant workers. Employers need and value these skills although this appreciation does not necessarily translate into higher pay or better working conditions.[5] Rafael and Lalo also reskilled with the mastering of new tools and technologies learned informally in their U.S. jobs, knowledge they then mobilized upon return to introduce new ways of executing job tasks. The valuable technical and interpersonal skills and work habits that they acquired in the United States either broadened their opportunities or empowered them to launch entrepreneurial activities and diversify local economies.

Skills of the "Unskilled" reports the findings of a five-year study launched to test prevalent assumptions about poor migrants with low levels of formal education: that they are a homogeneous group of target earners who neither possess measurable skills nor

learn new ones and who, because of their low levels of traditional human capital, face limited prospects for economic, social, and even geographic mobility in their migrant careers. To test these assumptions, we posed the following research questions:

1. What is the *total human capital* that migrants with low levels of education possess?
2. In what institutions and social contexts at home and abroad are these skills acquired? What roles do governments, communities, and families play in creating and maintaining these contexts?
3. How do the skill sets of women and men differ and how do gendered skill transfers shape labor market experiences abroad and upon return?
4. Which skills are better for migrants and return migrants? That is, are certain jobs and skills learned in Mexico better for employment prospects in the United States? Conversely, are some skills learned in the United States more easily transferred to Mexico than others? How are skill transfers related to industrial contexts of arrival and return?

We argue that migration is more than a strategy to earn higher wages, as posited by neoclassical economic theorists, or a means to overcome market failures and diversify household resources through the accumulation of savings, as viewed by the new economics of labor migration.[6] It is also a social process through which migrants learn and develop valuable but often hard-to-measure skills and transfer them across regional and international labor markets to broaden their opportunities abroad and upon return.

Sociologists Susan Star and Anselm Strauss have memorably described the manner in which individuals, especially those working in the service sector, such as janitors, maids, or caregivers, are often viewed as nonpeople despite the value of their work experience and substantial interpersonal skills.[7] The low degree of social recognition of these skills contributes to their low status. Nowhere is this truer than in the perception of "unskilled" migrants in the United States, and in particular, undocumented immigrants with low levels of education, who often learn through on- and off-the-job observation and informal interaction in their home communities and abroad. Because this group of workers is viewed as unskilled by virtue of their low levels of education and formal training, their labor market contributions are overlooked and their mobility pathways are poorly understood.

In this book, we draw on two stages of exploratory fieldwork, one in the United States, the other in Mexico, followed by a survey of a representative sample of 200 return migrants in Leon, Mexico, to identify and measure the *total human capital* that migrants with low levels of education can acquire, transfer, and apply throughout their life courses and migratory careers—before migration, while abroad, and upon return—to further their labor market opportunities. The skills, competences, and knowledge that we identify and describe here include easy-to-measure components of traditional human capital, such as education and language skills, but also incorporate sets of technical, social, and cultural competences that are harder to measure. These harder-to-measure abilities include working knowledge and technical skills learned informally through observation and interaction on and off the job in home communities and abroad, along with interpersonal competences that migrants acquire in new workplace environments, such as customer service,

leadership, teamwork, and innovative and culturally specific ways of approaching work. As we demonstrate, these social skills can sometimes translate into entrepreneurial activities. We further conceptualize the learning of skills as a lifelong and gendered process that is not restricted to an individual's time in school or in the workforce.[8] Our perspective emphasizes how and where total human capital is created, recognizing the importance of the social processes, contexts, and locations in which learning takes place, focusing on what people do rather than what their credentials may be.[9]

As the cases of Rafael, Lalo, and Anna demonstrate, migration is a social process through which migrants reskill and transfer new work experiences across borders to facilitate alternative mobility pathways. But the implications of skilling processes extend beyond individual labor market experiences because the acquisition and transfer of skills is also a process embedded in social relations, cultural practices, and distinctive labor markets in Mexico and the United States. Thus, international migration has the potential to change industry techniques, diversify local economies, and introduce new approaches to work, sometimes operating as an engine of social change in the communities to which migrants return. The linkage between individual labor market experiences and social change in local communities is especially characteristic of entrepreneurs in the return stage of the migratory circuit. Along with financial capital and technical skills, migrants return home with a cultural capital of sorts: self-confidence and the ability to deal with new challenges and to adapt to different approaches to work.

Our micro social analysis of human capital formation across the migratory circuit has broad implications for the ways in which migration and labor scholars and economic sociologists

conceptualize and measure skills and identify and assess the mobility pathways of migrants. In the migration literature the standard human capital model of socioeconomic attainment sees migration as an investment in which returns are balanced against costs.[10] According to human capital theory, migrants generally earn less than the native born because the human capital acquired in countries of origin is undervalued in destination labor markets. With the acquisition of country-specific human capital such as education, language skills, and professional credentials, however, immigrants can experience occupational mobility and wage growth.[11] Moreover, return migrants who bring back home with them these formal forms of human capital, including English language and additional schooling, may experience economic gains upon return if employers recognize and value these skills.[12] Although the theory recognizes that human capital includes both an individual's stock of observable skills (language, schooling) as well as unobservable skills (innate abilities, pre-labor market experiences), in the empirical literature data constraints compel most researchers to rely primarily on measurable proxies, such as years of education. As Allan Williams points out, this focus on officially recognized and codifiable knowledge privileges the more educated as "skilled" learners and knowledge bearers, encouraging a dichotomy of skilled and unskilled or low skilled based solely on formal qualifications. Ultimately, categories such as unskilled and even low skilled function as a black box: obscuring, instead of revealing, the social processes by which certain workers perform distinct jobs that also require knowledge, competences and tacit skills.[13]

Migration and labor scholars who study the technical and social skills of workers with little formal human capital have more recently recognized that "[w]ork at the bottom of the labor

market may require little formal education, but it nonetheless involves job-related proficiencies of significant degree."[14] In other words, the fact that certain jobs require fewer formally acquired skills does not mean that such jobs do not necessitate a measure of skill or working knowledge. These scholars also acknowledge that migrants working on the low-wage and less prestigious rungs of the labor market (in construction, hospitality, landscaping, manufacturing, and agriculture) often acquire job-specific skills and develop them informally on the job, learning by doing, observing, and through interaction and cooperation with others.[15] While our study also focuses on the skills learned in job-specific formal and informal work environments, we go further than prior contributors to this literature as we identify and describe those human capital skills learned through informal interaction and observation *outside* work environments in migrant homes and communities. This process of skill development begins in home and communal settings in the country of origin, when individuals at a young age participate in the building of a family home, or the repairing of a family automobile or household appliance. Following geographers David Beckett and Alan Williams, who recognize the importance of informal learning across the life cycle, we approach learning and skill development as a *lifelong process* that is not limited to an individual's labor market experiences or schooling.[16]

SKILL ACQUISITIONS AND TRANSFERS: INTEGRATING INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION, HUMAN CAPITAL, AND LEARNING APPROACHES

To shed light on how migrant workers with low levels of traditional human capital are able to acquire and mobilize skills across

the migratory circuit, we engage different scholarly traditions that thus far have had limited cross-fertilization: studies of knowledge and learning, scholarship on the labor process in industrial and postindustrial capitalism, and the empirical literature on international migration and human capital transfers. We build primarily on the literature on knowledge and learning that recognizes multiple types of knowledge and makes an important distinction between codified and tacit knowledge. The concept of tacit knowledge or tacit knowing was introduced by Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*[17] and later expanded in *The Tacit Dimension*[18] and *Meaning.*[19] Tacit knowledge refers to all forms of embodied personal knowledge, including the practical skills required to complete a task. According to Polanyi and Prosch, "any practical skill consists in the capacity for carrying out a great number of particular movements with a view to achieving a comprehensive result."[20] All forms of work involve some form of skill, even when those skills have been internalized and routinized and cannot be demonstrated or measured in explicit terms or cannot be adequately articulated by verbal means. It follows from Polanyi's concept of tacit knowing that while there are jobs that require distinct and varied skills, there are no unskilled jobs.

Following Polanyi's seminal contributions on tacit knowledge, sociologists examining the labor process have expanded on the concept of tacit skills, alternatively called working knowledge, competences, social skills, and also "soft" or "people" skills to distinguish them from technical skills.[21] Challenging Harry Braverman's argument that managerial control of the labor process in advanced capitalism requires the absolute deskilling of jobs and workers,[22] Tony Manwaring and Stephen Wood contend that all forms of work entail a series of tacit skills, which are often taken for granted because such skills are subjectively

rather than consciously deployed.[23] Similarly, Ken Kusturer contends that the "working knowledge" that goes into so-called unskilled jobs often remains invisible and that the routinized nature of certain tasks leads observers to overlook the obvious: that knowledge paradigms exist in every job.[24]

Tacit skills have individual as well as social dimensions. According to Manwaring and Wood, tacit skills are learned through experience and performed as routine tasks. Tacit skills also involve different levels of awareness, allowing workers to solve problems and make strategic decisions in the labor process. Finally, tacit skills are deployed as collective labor when workers cooperate to accomplish a task.[25] This third dimension is closely related to what Robert Reich refers to as social skills (those that facilitate communication) or what Karen Evans refers to as competences (social competences or communication skills; learning; methodological competences or networking skills; competences related to values and attitudes, such as responsibility and reliability; and practical competences or willingness to follow through and carry out tasks).[26]

Because tacit skills are applied when workers communicate and cooperate with each other, employers generally look for workers from distinct communities and populations who share some of these tacit skills. Instead of recruiting from the open labor market, firms use the social networks of existing employees to identify new hires. This explains why friends and relatives of current employees are the first to find out about and secure vacant jobs. Managers resort to this recruitment mechanism not just to reduce hiring costs but to find a "*stable core* of employees with *tacit skills* [that is] specific skills that new recruits require even in formally unskilled and semi-skilled jobs."[27] The practice of hiring through social networks has three important

implications: first, this type of recruitment creates durable relations between the firm and the community where employers find their workers; second, managers use the mutual obligations that characterize social networks to turn the hiring channel into a mechanism for social control within the firm;[28] and third, hiring through the social ties of existing employees and with certain tacit skills in mind brings a degree of closure to the labor markets of particular groups of workers, excluding those who are not members of the social network. While managers have the upper hand in this process, collectively applied tacit skills and shared social characteristics form the basis for workers to claim "membership in the social community of the workplace,"[29] for "workers [to] develop an identity in relation to the labor process,"[30] and particularly for workers with low levels of formal human capital and working in low-wage and less prestigious jobs to obtain a measure of power in the workplace and the larger labor market.[31]

Historically, studies of the labor process, tacit skills, and workplace learning have used native workers in industrial settings as the empirical basis for their analyses. And while it is clear that all workers deploy tacit and variable technical skills in the labor process, it is also clear that not all jobs are regulated in the same way and not all workers receive the same social recognition for their labor. In the early 1970s, economists and sociologists developed the concept of the internal labor market to show how, in different segments of the economy, jobs and labor are governed by different sets of rules. In the primary sector, regulated by government and dominated by large corporations, the internal labor market offers workers (primarily male) job security, higher-than-living wages, collective bargaining, medical and other benefits, and mobility opportunities based on seniority and skill. As Michael

Piore argues, having invested in their workers' skills, employers seek to retain them over the long term.[32]

By contrast, in the secondary sector of the labor market, jobs are not regulated by the government, typically pay low wages, do not require formal skills, do not provide collective bargaining and other group benefits, offer minimal to no mobility opportunities, and quickly disappear when demand shrinks. In the secondary sector, interactions between managers and workers are framed in highly personalistic terms instead of the rational-bureaucratic employer-employee rules of the primary sector. As Peter Doeringer and Michael Piore state, "the secondary sector tends to be associated with the employment of certain social and demographic groups—women, youth, and ethnic and racial minorities,"[33] and as Piore subsequently argued, migrants are a key social group that fits the needs of the industrial society's secondary labor market. Migrants initially think of their presence in the host society as only temporary, an orientation that contributes to a weak attachment to the local labor market. Furthermore, the newcomers' assessment of wages and working conditions in a foreign land are based on the standards of their home country. This dual frame of reference partly explains why migrant workers are willing to take low-paying and low-status jobs otherwise rejected by natives.[34] In fact, as Roger Waldinger and Michael Lichter argued, employers might prefer migrants over native workers because of their status as societal outsiders. In other words, the social distance between employer and employee in terms of nativity, legal status, race, and language makes the foreigner a "natural" candidate for jobs considered too demeaning for natives to take.[35] Dual labor market theory thus is less concerned with the absolute levels of skill newcomers possess and more with the relationship between the migrant and the societal institutions that regulate labor and employment.

Migrants do sustain more than a fleeting presence in the host society, however. As time passes, newcomers become acquainted with the mobility opportunities available in the country of destination. And repeated sojourning allows them to establish long-term connections to employers who, in turn, develop a preference for foreign labor, demanding more of the same. Established foreign-born employees are entrusted by supervisors with the task of supplying new recruits from the country of origin. Pioneer migrants make use of their kinship and friendship networks to satisfy this demand, while creating a powerful "engine of migration"[36] and a de facto extended labor market connecting workers at home with employment opportunities abroad.[37] The labor-market beachheads that migrants first establish become full-blown colonies, or what scholars have called ethnic niches, that is, distinct occupational concentrations and specializations that result from skill, network connections, language, and discrimination.[38] As this process unfolds, the workplaces migrants colonize also become populated with the tacit skills these newcomers have transferred from the home country, applied, and continued to develop at the destination. The self-feeding mechanism behind this social process is transparent: once migrants, with their common language and tacit skills, dominate the occupational niche, employers will be compelled to go to the newcomers' social networks to staff the workplace and get the job done. A byproduct of this process is that the occupations dominated by migrants become associated with the real and imagined characteristics of the newcomers, turning them into "migrant" jobs, that is, jobs only migrants take on.

The scholarship on both knowledge and learning and the labor process recognize that workers with low levels of formal education deploy a variety of skills in the workplace. In contrast,

the empirical literature on migration and human capital and skill transfers has focused almost exclusively on the study and measurement of formally acquired, codifiable human capital, often capturing it through a handy but problematic indicator: years of schooling.[39] This limited and limiting understanding of human capital has led some economists working in the human capital tradition to argue that the quality of today's immigrants is declining compared to the newcomers of earlier waves.[40]

There are several additional problems with the empirical literature on human capital investments, migration, and skill transfers. Often neglected in this literature is the learning and transfer of skills from the home country.[41] The economists Harriet Duleep and Martin Regets have recognized this flaw in human capital models and developed a more inclusive theoretical model of human capital investment called the Elusive Concept of Immigrant Quality.[42] One of the things that Duleep and Regets stress in their model is the value of home country skills for learning new skills. They argue that although technologies between source and destination countries may differ, the materials and goals of the skills are comparable. Drawing on the case of a Cambodian carpenter, they illustrate how "his experience with a hand saw comes into use when learning to use an electric saw." To quote from their summary, "People who have learned one set of skills, even if those skills are not valued in the destination country's labor market, have advantages in learning a new set: in learning a previous skill, one learns how to learn."[43]

Sociologists have also documented the skills and working knowledge that migrants acquire in their home countries and mobilize to advance their labor market careers in the United States. Rubén Hernández-León found that immigrant machinists working in Houston's petrochemical industry had trans-

ferred machinist skills acquired on the job in Mexico and used them to leverage higher wages and better work conditions in their U.S. occupations.[44] These migrants tapped into social networks composed of workers with similar skill levels to obtain information about employment opportunities and identify companies and jobs that offered higher pay. In this process, workers not only transferred skills but also developed new ones as they learned how to operate more advanced, computer-controlled machines. These machinists were able to reskill because of the trigonometry and drafting lessons they had received in secondary school and the vast on-the-job skills they accumulated in Mexico. In his study of Caribbean and Korean immigrants in the construction and buildings trade in New York City, Roger Waldinger found that premigration experience in the construction work gave immigrant business owners an edge over their native-born counterparts.[45] Similarly, Jacqueline Hagan and colleagues found that undocumented immigrant construction workers laboring in the building and trades industry in the United States had previously acquired many of their construction skills on the job in Mexico and / or the United States. Once in the United States they regularly mobilized these skills to "job jump" to better positions.[46]

Though the technologies used in construction and building trades in the two countries are different, the skills that migrants had acquired in Mexico, nonetheless, had value in their U.S. construction jobs. For example, as Hagan and her colleagues found, many of the construction workers had learned to mold bricks by hand in Mexico. Their familiarity with the brick material proved useful when it came time to lay bricks in their U.S. jobs. The construction workers also learned new on-the-job skills in the United States, which they then mobilized to negotiate higher

wages and "job jump," called *brincar* (as the migrants refer to it), an individual labor market strategy that is purposefully and successfully used by both native-born workers and highly skilled immigrants to circumvent discrimination and secure higher wages and better working conditions.[47] Their ability to job jump, however, was also dependent on the workers being able to demonstrate their skills and the employers to recognize them, especially in the case of tacit skills, which are common skill sets in construction work.

Other scholars challenging traditional measures of human capital also recognize the importance of social skills and competences learned informally on the job abroad. In their study of skilled labor migrants who had returned to Slovakia, geographers Allan Williams and Vladimir Baláž find that the value of working abroad extends beyond professional experience and training to gains associated with improved communication skills, along with personal competences, such as self-confidence.[48] There is every reason to assume that the "unskilled" migrant returns home with similarly enhanced social and personal skills acquired in new work environments in the U.S. labor market. As Williams argues, the acquisition of both tacit and technical knowledge is dispersed across local, regional, and national labor markets; across jobs, from the professional to the informally skilled; and across populations whether educated to the doctoral or the third grade level.[49] This is not to say that the distinction between social and technical is always clear. Take the case of English language capital, which as we show is one of the most valued skills acquired abroad among our sample of return migrants. It is both a communication and a technical skill, and while it can be directly rewarded through paid employment, it is also valorized through the generation of self-esteem and social recognition.[50]

Not all knowledge (even that which is codified) is shared or recognized, however, nor is it always valued or rewarded. Successful knowledge transfers are shaped by mobility that is bounded (within intercompany transfers) or unbounded as part of the career of what Williams refers to as "free agent labor migrants" who forge their own mobility pathways.[51] Disadvantaged ethnic groups may also experience blocked mobility in their jobs if their skills are not recognized.[52] Successful transfers also depend on the language of work and whether the migrant is authorized to work. Lack of English language ability can make it more difficult for a migrant to demonstrate skills, and lack of work authorization may impose institutional barriers that block mobility and rewards, even when skills are recognized.[53]

In this book we go further than existing research to explain how migrants and return migrants develop skills in their labor market careers. We identify and describe the cumulative process of formal and informal skill acquisition and transfer across three stages of the migratory circuit, from native work and life experiences to U.S. employment, to life after returning home. Contrary to accounts that focus solely on blocked mobility and exploitation, we contend that migrants mobilize skills across jobs, labor markets, and borders. That is, informal learning and work experience at home and abroad matter for the long-term success and careers of migrants.

The research we present in this book has broad implications not only for how skills are conceptualized and measured, but also for how the mobility pathways of migrants and return migrants are assessed. Studies that look at human capital in the traditional way usually measure economic mobility, be it higher wages (which is almost always the case), occupational change, or self-employment, solely as an outcome of skills acquisition in the more developed

country.[54] In contrast, we conceptualize skills acquisition and development as a lifelong process embedded in workplaces, families, and communities throughout the migrant trajectory. We stress that human capital models should not only focus on narrow cross-sectional measures of mobility but also consider skills acquisition as a social process and a mobility pathway in and of itself. Along these lines, we demonstrate the ways in which skills acquired at one stage of the migratory cycle can create individual labor market opportunities at another stage. We further suggest that skill transfers have the potential to extend beyond individual opportunity, sometimes contributing to the generation of entrepreneurial ventures. In this way, skill transfers fuel local development, shape industry techniques, and influence work practices. And because our mixed methodology includes a survey with detailed measures of occupations and skills across the migratory trajectory, case studies, and workplace observations, our research is in a prime position to address the relationship among individual skill transfers, job mobility, and social change in local economies.

RESEARCH DESIGN, STUDY SITES, AND SAMPLE

Skills of the "Unskilled" is based on two stages of exploratory fieldwork, followed by a survey of a representative sample of return migrants in Leon, Guanajuato, and two case studies. Stage One (2007–09) involved a study of roughly 50 immigrant construction workers in North Carolina.[55] We selected the construction industry for several reasons. First, at the time of our study, 2007–09, it was the fastest growing employer of Mexican immigrants in the state.[56] Second, most jobs in construction depend heavily on learning by observation and interaction rather than

formal education and involve a variety of explicit and tacit skills. As such, this industry provides a strategic setting in which to study on-the-job skills acquisition and the social context in which it takes place, and so we conducted a half-dozen worksite observations. From this North Carolina research, we learned that on-the-job skills learning in places of both origin and destination is fundamental to understanding the mobility pathways of immigrants with low levels of traditional human capital.

Based on our initial findings—that many migrants in the construction industry bring some skills with them and return home with additional ones—it was only natural to extend the exploratory stage of the study to examine skill transfers back to Mexico. Stage Two (2009) involved exploratory field research in Guanajuato, Mexico (see Figure 1.1). We selected Guanajuato because we had network connections in the state; because it includes both rural and urban areas that are well-established migrant sending areas; and because of its dynamic yet uneven development and diverse economic structures, features we sought for the variety of skill transfers we might find. Guanajuato has a system of cities of varied size and economic specialization, with some urban areas structured around services and others organized around manufacturing for the international or the internal market. In 2009, a team of researchers traveled to 12 communities in Guanajuato and conducted lengthy interviews with 79 return female and male migrants working in different occupations and industries.

From this second stage of exploratory research, we discovered the importance of off-the-job learning to working-class Mexicans with low levels of traditional human capital. We further found that many migrants reskilled in the United States, learning to work with new technology and approaching work tasks in new

Figure 1.1. State of Guanajuato and principal urban research sites.

ways. We also found that some skills are place specific and cannot be transferred to Mexico (e.g., certain techniques used in roofing, sheetrocking, and some aspects of agriculture and husbandry), while others are easily transferable (e.g., skills in metalworking and automotive repair, and English language skills that often create economic opportunities upon return). We also identified a number of nontechnical skills that migrants are exposed to in their U.S. jobs and bring back with them from the United States, such productive intangibles as customer service, punctuality, and organizational and leadership skills. As expected, we found that the industrial context of return matters. For example, some migrants who returned to their small rural communities were unable to apply their customer service and language skills in these limited arenas and so opted to migrate to tourist towns and international business centers where their new skills could be applied to promote economic opportunity. Recognizing the importance of industrial context for skills transfers, in 2012 we conducted two case studies of skills transferability, one in a rural village in Guanajuato and the other in the Guanajuato tourist town of San Miguel de Allende. These case studies, which involved lengthy interviews with 20 return migrants at each site, along with worksite observations, enabled us to examine further the relevance of local institutions and industrial contexts of return for encouraging and supporting skill transfers.

Stages One and Two revealed the acquisition of skills in Guanajuato and in North Carolina's construction industry, but neither captured the learning careers of migrants nor the entire process of transnational human capital acquisition and its implications for economic mobility. The only way to truly understand these processes was to interview the migrants across the migratory circuit, and identify the skills learned and mobilized at each

stage. Thus, in Stage Three we drew on our qualitative findings and developed a survey instrument that would retrospectively capture the skill acquisitions of women and men across the migratory circuit, detailing work experiences, learning techniques, and skill transfers before migration, while abroad, and upon return. Recognizing the importance of industrial context, we selected Leon, Guanajuato, as our strategic research site to interview a random sample of 200 return migrants. The survey's 150 closed-ended answers, which capture detailed job and migration histories and skill acquisition and transfers, were coded into STATA.[57] The responses to an additional 30 open-ended questions were transcribed into a word processing file and organized by theme. Finally, to conclude the interview, each respondent relayed (via a voice recorder) a personal narrative of lifelong work experience and skill development and transfers. These narratives were also transcribed and then organized by gender, occupation, industry, and by additional themes as they emerged from a review of the data.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF LEON

Leon, Guanajuato, is a sprawling industrial city with a population of almost 1.3 million, the largest in the state. Known as the shoe capital of Mexico, it produces about two-thirds of the country's leather and almost all of it goes into shoes. Its specialty lines are cowboy boots and men's shoes. Not surprisingly, leather and shoemaking, together with textiles, are the largest employers in Leon, accounting for 20 percent of the city's labor force. The shoe industry is organized in three types of establishments: large manufacturing plants, medium-sized factories, and small, family-owned "*picas*." These different types of establishments are

not isolated from each other; they are in fact interconnected through the mobility of labor and subcontracting relations. Skill acquisition begins at an early age in the *picas* (also called *piquitas*) and medium-sized workshops where young men work as apprentices and helpers to fathers and older relatives. *Picas* and workshops employ a handful of workers per establishment and are often unregistered.[58] Men trained in the *picas* and workshops often find jobs in large factories where they apply skills conducting specialized tasks and earn higher wages and benefits. Family-owned *picas* and medium-sized shops are also subcontracted by large manufacturing establishments, which transfer old machinery, supplies, and raw materials to the smaller units. During economic downturns, laid-off factory workers find refuge in the hundreds of family-owned, informal tanneries and *picas* that dot the shoe districts of Leon.[59]

A traditional manufacturing sector largely oriented to the domestic market, the city's leather and shoemaking industries have suffered the effects of Mexico's sweeping economic restructuring. Once a referent of the government's economic development strategy of import-substitution industrialization, the shoe industry has struggled to adapt to the new model of export-oriented industrialization and open markets. In 1986, Mexico became signatory to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which removed licenses and taxes that had sheltered domestic production from foreign competition. Lower tariffs and unregulated imports had a direct impact on domestic production, which began a steady decline. In 1988, Mexico produced 245 million pairs of shoes and imported only 5.5 million pairs. The following year, only 200 million pairs of shoes were produced in Mexico, while imports, mostly from the United States, East Asian countries, and Brazil, underwent more than a

fourfold growth, reaching 23 million pairs.[60] In response to the lobbying efforts of trade organizations, the Mexican government established dumping penalties on Chinese shoe imports and in 1993 issued a new law to tax foreign shoe and leather products. From a high of nearly 48 million pairs in 1992, shoe imports declined to only 10 million in 1996.[61]

In 1994, Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada. Although NAFTA allowed for a modest growth of Mexican exports and established rules to avoid the importation of Taiwanese-made shoes via the United States, the small firms typical of the Mexican shoe industry were not able to benefit from the newly signed treaty.[62] Efforts to develop the shoe and leather industry in Leon along the lines of the Italian industrial districts and to take advantage of the export opportunities opened by NAFTA appeared to yield limited results.[63] In 2008, Mexico exported only 5 percent of the shoes produced in the country and imported 55 million pairs or 19 percent of the shoes sold domestically.[64]

In addition to a steady process of market liberalization, Mexico's economic restructuring has been punctuated by recessions and crises. The 1995 financial crisis and devaluation of the peso, when more than $8 billion left the country in less than a week, had a mixed effect on the leather and shoe industry.[65] On the one hand, the devaluation lowered the cost of Mexican shoes and made imports more expensive. The dramatic change in the exchange rate of the peso explains the rise in exports from 5.1 million pairs of shoes in 1994 to 11.6 million pairs in 1995. On the other hand, the crisis produced an overall decline in the demand for shoes, leading to a net loss of thousands of jobs and the closing of nearly 150 shoe manufacturing plants in Leon.[66] Because

of these economic hardships, many of the city's factories increased the share of routine work outsourced to lower-paid home workers. Small household firms, many of which were kinship based, adopted a risk aversion strategy, shelving specialty lines (e.g., cowboy boots) and concentrating on secure markets (e.g., school shoes) to survive the crisis.[67] Though the industry eventually rebounded somewhat, Mexico's economic liberalization coupled with successive economic crises displaced many urban workers, including those in leather and shoemaking who made their way north in search of work.[68] We revisit some of the most recent challenges faced by the leather and shoe industry in Leon as we analyze the context of return for our survey respondents in chapter 5.

In addition to the industrial context, we selected Leon because international migrants from this city have several characteristics that made them well suited for our project. Unlike the traditional and predominantly rural migration stream that has attracted young men with limited skills, the migrants from Leon and other industrial centers in Mexico acquire diverse skill sets before migration.[69] Furthermore, although these metropolitan districts are important sending areas, they have remained understudied in the Mexico-U.S. migratory circuit. Finally, we wanted a city with a diverse industrial base to capture a range of total human capital so that we could explore various opportunities for skills transfers, economic mobility, and local economic development. In addition to the leather industry, Leon is home to a cluster of textile, automotive, chemical, and transportation industries, as well as a growing service sector. This sectorial diversity was an especially important consideration since we learned from our exploratory research and the literature on Mexico-U.S. migration that migrants often choose not to return

to the towns and hamlets they call home. Instead, migrants frequently return to medium and large cities because these urban areas offer diverse and thriving markets to invest accumulated capital and apply skills learned through migration.[70] Still, we know relatively little about how return migrants use savings and skills in urban settings.

We were reluctant at first to choose Leon because of the dominance of the shoe industry; however, we soon realized it would be valuable to examine how many former migrants returned to the shoe industry and in what capacity, considering that the informality and small size of most factories put ownership within reach of an individual or family with sufficient financial means. Further enriching the sample is the fact that shoe industry production is largely driven by workers' experience. Some tasks are simple and routine (cutting leather); others require more developed skills and involve multitasking (operating and repairing industrial machines, assembling shoes); still others are highly skilled and require both talent and years of experience (e.g., designing shoes). Because leather and shoemaking skills are acquired and improve through on-the-job observation, interaction, and informal training, the industry provides a perfect opportunity to better understand the role of on-the-job learning of skills in migrants' mobility pathways.

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO DATA AND SAMPLE

This research project has extended over five years during which time the authors interviewed 50 immigrants in the United States; a representative sample of 200 return migrants in Leon, and in greater depth an additional nonrandom sample of 79 return

migrants in 12 communities of different sizes and industrial features in the state of Guanajuato. Collectively, these surveys, in-depth interviews, and worksite observations allowed us to identify and measure the lifelong human capital of our study population and make the case for skills acquisition and transfer among the so-called "unskilled." From the survey findings, in-depth interviews, and worksite observations, we developed detailed occupation and skill-level codes, variables to capture learning contexts in home communities in Mexico and labor markets in the United States, and measures of social and technical human capital acquired and transferred across the migratory circuit. These learning contexts and measures of total human capital and skill levels, which we use throughout the book, are presented in Table 1.1.

The descriptive statistics presented in this book come from the Leon random sample of return migrants, while the narratives and quotes in the text are drawn from worksite observations on either side of the border, from the qualitative dimension of the Leon survey, and from labor market experiences described to us in key interviews and community case studies. While all the statistics refer to the experiences of the random sample of return migrants, we do incorporate some selected findings from the exploratory stages of the fieldwork. For example, in chapter 4, "Transferring Skills, Reskilling, and Laboring in the United States," we include narratives from the North Carolina construction worker sample. Similarly, in chapter 5, "Returning Home and Reintegrating into the Local Labor Market," we draw narratives from the in-depth interviews conducted in multiple locations in Guanajuato in 2009 to emphasize the importance of the industrial context of return.

Our Leon sample of 200 return migrants reside in a variety of areas both in the center and the outskirts of town and not in a

TABLE I.1

Skill types and levels and learning contexts created and used in analysis

Variable	Definition
Formal education	Years of completed schooling.
English	Sufficient knowledge of English such that a migrant recognizes it as a skill and may use it in a job.
On-the-job learning	Technical skills learned through observation, interaction, and other informal learning processes that can be transferred across occupations and industries (cooking, painting, framing, constructing a stone wall, auto body repair, operating and repairing machinery). In a few cases these involved on-the-job training classes, e.g., workplace safety classes.
Off-the-job learning	Technical skills similar to those above that migrants acquire in the home or in nonwork environments in communities of origin (working on a neighbor's home; appliance repair; working on the engine of a family car; specialized domestic activities, including the preparation of regional foods).
Social skills and competences	Customer service skills, new ways of approaching work, new work habits (e.g., punctuality), entrepreneurial skills (e.g., initiative), self-confidence, leadership skills, teamwork, and follow-through. These are skills that migrants reported acquiring in specific occupational settings as a result of occupational change.
Skill level 1	Work that requires little training and involves one repetitive task, e.g. dishwasher, leather cutter, laborer who mows lawns.
Skill level 2	Requires experience and formal or informal training. Involves multitasking or the mastery of a specific skill, e.g., painter, *ayudante* (helper), gardener who can prune trees and build walls.

Skill level 3	Work based on extensive occupational mobility over time and mastering of all skills within an occupation through extensive formal or informal training, e.g., *maestro albañil* (master mason), shoe designer, factory floor supervisor, carpenter, nurse, teacher.
Self-employed	Returned migrants who reported owning their own businesses. This does not include return migrants who were independent contractors, such as *albañiles*, unless they owned a business that was housed in a structure.
Patrón	Returned migrants who reported owning their own business with one or more employees.

single or even a cluster of adjacent neighborhoods. However, because return migrants are rarely present in very high- and very low-income neighborhoods, most of our respondents were residents of low- and low-middle income blocks.[71] Tables 1.2 and 1.3 introduce the sample and provide some basic characteristics of the Leon migrants. Throughout the course of the book, we profile the sample in greater depth, describing relevant characteristics in each of the substantive chapters. As Table 1.2 shows, 86 percent of the return migrants in our sample are male. This sex ratio is consistent with other studies of return migration showing that Mexican women are more likely than men to stay longer or settle permanently in the United States, often migrating to join a spouse or another family member.[72] Because of the small number of females in the sample, we acknowledge that we should interpret gender comparisons with care. Fortunately, we have the findings from in-depth interviews conducted with female return migrants in the exploratory second stage of the project, which we also rely on in our qualitative analysis. The

TABLE 1.2

Profile of return migrant sample

Individual Characteristics (at time of interview)	Total (n=200)	Men (n=172)	Women (n=28)
Age (mean)	39.6	39.6	39.3
Married	82%	86%	61%
Education Level			
Less than primary	26%	25%	29%
Completed primary	21%	22%	14%
Some secondary	34%	35%	32%
Completed secondary	12%	11%	18%
More than secondary	7%	7%	7%
Work and Migration History (means)			
Total years worked	21.8	22.4	18.5
Years worked prior to first migration	7.5	7.7	5.7
Years working in U.S.	4.4	4.6	3.2
Years since last return	7.5	7.9	5.6

NOTE: Due to missing values, number of observations for each variable ranges from 191 to 200.

average age of the respondent at the time of the survey was 39 years for both men and women, suggesting that for some their migratory careers may be completed. Eighty-six percent of the men were married compared to 61 percent of the women, and at least half had children at the time of their first migration, factors that would weigh heavily in decisions to return home from the United States.[73]

Although we recognize that some in our sample may remigrate to the United States at some point in their labor market careers, we analyze return migration as a permanent event. The characteristics of our sample suggest a fairly permanent return migrant stream. Most are older (mean = 39) than one would

expect from the typical temporary migrant. In contrast to the repeat migration of rural streams from Mexico, more than half of our Leon sample undertook only one trip to the United States and an equal percentage have been home ten years, suggesting a low probability of remigration, and as our analysis in chapter 5 highlights, about 60 percent returned because they were drawn home to be with family or because they had completed their migration objectives.

Table 1.2 also shows that the return migrants possess relatively low levels of traditional human capital as measured by years of formal education, a finding consistent with other studies showing that return migrants have lower levels of education than Mexicans who stay in the United States.[74] Except for a handful of return migrants who had attended a university or a vocational school before migrating and then returned to finish that schooling, the educational levels presented in Table 1.2 refer to completed years of formal schooling before migration. As the table shows, 81 percent of the sample had not finished secondary school (middle school) at the time of the interview, and more than a quarter had not completed primary school. Yet, despite their relatively low levels of formal education, the Leon return migrants possess considerable total human capital as measured by work experience. On average, our respondents entered the labor force 22 years ago, with significant differences between men (22.4 years) and women (18.5 years). Not surprisingly, men (7.7 years) had accumulated more years of work experience than women (5.7 years) before undertaking their first migration to the United States. Men have also spent slightly more time working in the United States than women, 4.6 and 3.2 years respectively. Similarly, men have spent 4.7 years employed since their last return compared to 2.9 years for women. Despite these gender differences, what is clear is that both men

and women spent considerable time in the labor force before migration, while abroad, and upon return—providing us with the opportunity to examine and compare skill acquisitions and transferences across the migratory circuit and assess their implications for economic mobility pathways.

We are aware that we cannot attribute some skills acquired by our respondents to the fact that they migrated to the United States. Men and women develop competences and acquire knowledge as they progress through their employment careers and it is possible that at least some of the skills attributed to international migration could also be obtained in the local labor market or by migrating internally. Teasing out with precision the sources of different skills would require comparing similar samples of migrants and nonmigrants. While we also collected a sample of nonmigrants in Leon, we only inject their numbers into our analysis when we compare the experiences of the reintegration of return migrants into the Leon labor market to highlight the distinctive skills acquired abroad. We believe that a larger comparative endeavor would detract from the central goal of this book: to focus specifically on the skills that are transferred, adapted, and learned across stages of the migratory circuit as sojourners negotiate leaving, entering, and navigating labor markets at home and abroad.[75]

We also realize that beyond exposure to particular labor and societal dynamics, migrants' distinct characteristics might predispose them to be rapid learners, apt problem solvers, and innovators. The migration literature has long referenced and sought to understand the mechanisms by which individuals get positively selected into international sojourning, a process that by all means requires the ability to take on and manage risk and uncertainty and deftly adapt to new situations. It is likely that in some

TABLE 1.3

Distribution of Leon return migrants and total working population of Leon by economic sector (2010)

Industry	Leon Sample	Leon (City)
Agriculture	0.5%	0.4%
Construction	12.4%	6.2%
Shoe, leather, and textile manufacturing	20.0%	20.1%
Other manufacturing	9.7%	9.1%
Automotive and bicycle repair	7.6%	1.3%
Retail and hospitality	36.8%	29.3%
Other services	12.9%	32.4%
Other industries (mining, utilities, and unspecified)	—	1.1%

SOURCE: Leon city population, INEGI, *Censo de Población y Vivienda* 2010, Microdatos de la Muestra. www.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/microdatos2/default2010.aspx.

of our individual cases, the ability to acquire and mobilize skills is also connected to the traits that selected our respondents into the process of migration. Whatever the individual case may be, migrants themselves tend to believe that there was little hope for the development and mobilization of their talents and abilities on home ground, and hence their decisions to migrate.

Table 1.3 compares the job distribution by industry of the sample at the time of the survey with a 10 percent sample of the Leon labor force from INEGI, the Mexican census, in the same year. To indirectly tap into some of the distinct occupations of return migrants, we developed more detailed categories, such as breaking down manufacturing into three different types of production, including shoe and leather manufacturing, other manufacturing, and automotive and bicycle repair. The table illustrates some similarities and distinctions between our sample and the Leon

labor force. Both populations were equally represented in shoe, leather, and textile manufacturing, though as we shall discuss in chapter 5, return migrants were more likely than nonmigrants to be self-employed in this industry (see Table 5.5). The table also shows that return migrants were more likely than nonmigrants to work in retail and hospitality, construction, and automotive and bicycle repair. In chapter 5, where we analyze the labor market incorporation of return migrants, we will demonstrate that the distinct industrial breakdown of the Leon sample compared to the total working population of Leon is in part related to the skills they transferred home from the United States, skills that we argue also help shed light on the much higher self-employed percentage among the return migrants compared to the total Leon population of comparable age (27 percent vs. 15 percent; see Table 5.5).

ROADMAP OF THE BOOK

The next five chapters of the book follow the social processes of learning and transferring skills across the three stages of the migratory circuit: before, during, and after migration. Chapter 2, "Learning Skills in Communities of Origin," reveals that the learning of skills begins early in the life of many migrants. More specifically, the chapter describes the multiple social contexts and institutions in which migrants learn skills before migration in their home communities, from families to schools to workplaces and other community contexts. In Leon, as well as in other cities and rural areas of Guanajuato, learning and skills acquisition take place during late childhood and early adolescence in the context of home-based and family-owned businesses in traditional industries. As we describe in chapter 2, the shoe industry clustered in Leon and its myriad unregistered

household-organized *picas* offer the informal training grounds where mostly young men learn basic shoemaking skills from fathers and more experienced workers.

Chapter 3, "Mobilizing Skills and Migrating," focuses on the proximate causes and dynamics of migration to the United States. Even though migration from Guanajuato to *el norte* is a century-old phenomenon, the stream from Leon to the United States emerged largely during the second half of the 1990s, when economic restructuring and liberalization and a financial crisis converged to produce one of the largest waves of outmigration from Mexico to the United States in history. The majority of the return migrants we surveyed in Leon were part and parcel of this great migration. Most of our Leon respondents migrated to the United States without documents and have conducted one or two migratory trips. California and Texas were the most common destinations of these respondents, although a substantial number also migrated to nontraditional destinations. The salience of traditional destinations reflects the fact that, as newcomers to the social process of migration, the residents of Leon rely primarily on established kinship networks, which have long channeled migrants to California and Texas.

Chapter 4, "Transferring Skills, Reskilling, and Laboring in the United States," focuses primarily on the experiences of the migrants in their first and last U.S. jobs. We demonstrate that far from being unskilled, Mexican migrants have working knowledge and skills they first acquired at home and later deployed in the United States. These skills become explicit as migrants encounter new technologies, interact with other workers, and need to solve problems in the workplace. We also discuss which skills are transferable to U.S. jobs and which are not. The chapter highlights the reskilling that takes place on job sites and at

workplaces in the United States as migrants learn new techniques and work with different materials and tools. In chapter 4, we also find that the experiences of skills acquisition and mobility are different for men and women and explain how and why occupational and mobility paths are gendered.

In chapter 5, "Returning Home and Reintegrating into the Local Labor Market," we analyze the economic context of departure from the United States as well as the conditions of arrival in Guanajuato during the 2006–10 period, when most of our survey respondents returned home to Mexico. Interestingly, the majority of respondents attributed their return to family reasons and not to economic factors associated with the impact of the great recession in the United States. We interpret this finding with caution as the need to return for family reasons might reflect the difficulty to bring close family members to the United States as well as low levels of social integration. Our respondents returned to a fluid context characterized by modest economic growth, a sharp downturn caused by the U.S. and global financial crises, and then a sustained recovery.

More than half of our respondents said that they transferred skills learned in the United States to Mexico (see Table 5.2). Our data indicate that the skills transferred and applied to jobs upon return are more diverse than the ones our respondents first mobilized when they migrated to the United States. Our findings also indicate that men and women transfer skills differently. Reflecting their incorporation into service jobs that required constant face-to-face interaction with English-speaking supervisors in the United States, women transferred language skills back home at twice the rate of men. Interestingly, many of the skills acquired formally by men in institutional settings, via safety and other state-enforced programs, were not readily transferable to Leon.

In other cases, the technology used in the United States was not available in Mexico. In contrast to the technical skills applied by men, women were more likely to transfer social and interpersonal skills, highly appreciated in service industries that revolve around customer satisfaction.

In the concluding chapter 6, we summarize the findings of the study and consider its policy implications. Our work has implications for the migration policies of both the United States and Mexico. There is a fundamental skills mismatch in current U.S. immigration policy that gives preference to "skilled" immigrants who rank high on traditional human capital attributes and restricts the entry of "low-skilled" migrants, a classification that ignores the high level of informal skills and working knowledge they bring to labor markets, especially to industries like construction that have been partly vacated by the native born but traditionally characterized as very skilled. And while the failure to pass comprehensive immigration reform has temporarily closed some opportunities to bring attention to the skills that so-called "unskilled" migrants import from the home country and deploy in U.S. labor markets, we believe that our work can inform the efforts of migrant advocacy groups, economic and social justice organizations and foundations, and binational institutions dedicated to workforce development and migrant and worker rights.

Mexico also can benefit from our findings. While sizeable return flows are a long and persistent characteristic of the Mexico-U.S. migratory system, the great recession, stepped-up enforcement, and a policy of mass deportations have impacted patterns of return migration to Mexico. From 2005–10, 1.4 million migrants moved back to Mexico, a figure twice the rate of those who returned home from 1995 to 2000.[76] The Mexican government has a long history of building programs to serve

Mexicans abroad and encourage their remittances. In this context, it is notable that the Mexican government has only begun developing policies to reintegrate returning migrants to local and regional labor markets and to harness the skills acquired in the United States and transferred back home. Our research suggests that the Mexican government would be well served by supporting self-employment ventures and reintegration programs that recognize the enhanced skill sets of return migrants, many of whom are able to fill valued positions and start businesses of their own, creating more jobs in their home communities and thus promoting local economic development.

CONCLUSION

Despite the lack of formal credentials to authenticate their skills and despite the many institutional hurdles they faced because of their unauthorized status, Lalo, Anna, and Rafael succeeded in mobilizing their lifelong human capital across the migratory circuit to improve their economic circumstances. In this book, we argue that, contrary to prevailing scholarship, many international migrants with low levels of formal education and training like Lalo, Anna, and Rafael are far from unskilled. In fact, shorthands such as "unskilled" and even "low skilled" obscure a complex social and lifelong process of skill acquisition, development, and mobilization across stages of the migratory circuit. Based on qualitative and quantitative data collected with returnees in Guanajuato, Mexico, we demonstrate that migrants begin to acquire skills early on in the sending country in family, communal, and workplace settings. Active and latent skills acquired through these informal learning experiences are transferred to worksites in the United States where they are made explicit by

migrants as they solve problems, seek better working conditions and wages, and interact with coworkers and employers.

Our approach, which involves tracing labor market experiences across the migratory circuit and broadening our notion of how we measure mobility, enables us to overcome many of the methodological shortcomings of earlier studies, moving beyond rather unreliable wage data to identifying both skill improvements and transitions to better-paying and more skilled jobs as measures of mobility. We find that even though migrants face numerous constraints and often encounter exploitative conditions, many of them transfer and acquire skills that facilitate limited but real labor market mobility in the United States. Once in the U.S. labor market, migrants develop new skills, including working with more advanced technologies, using different materials, and becoming familiar with new ways of organizing the labor process. Moreover, migrants often use their personal and employment-based networks to jump between jobs for reasons that include the opportunity to earn higher wages, circumvent abusive conditions, and demonstrate newly acquired skills.

The majority of the respondents in our study report transferring newly acquired skills back to the home country, but the transfer of these skills upon return is not a seamless process. Many of our respondents state that not all skills could be transferred and applied because working materials and technologies are different. Nonetheless, we find that the skills and working knowledge acquired abroad, at times in combination with the capital accumulated through migration, facilitate important transformations in the occupational trajectories of our respondents who are able to secure better-paid and more skilled positions, obtain jobs in services, and initiate entrepreneurial ventures.