

A CONTEXTUAL MODEL OF RETURN LABOR MIGRATION

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ABSTRACT: As of 2017, 258 million persons or 3.4 percent of the world's population lived outside of their countries of birth. Extensive research analyzes and theorizes processes of emigration and immigrant integration. Yet, international migration is not a one-way flow. Estimates suggest that about two in five international migrants return to their communities of origin within five years of emigration. To understand the labor market reintegration of return migrants in various global settings, we draw on an eight-year study that included repeated interviews with 153 returnees to develop a contextual model of return labor migration (CRLM). Our sociological model moves beyond rational-actor based economic models. We demonstrate that return migration and labor market reintegration are contextually embedded social processes that are shaped by migrants' life-course stages and the social, economic, and spatial features of their origin communities.

INTRODUCTION

We live in an age of migration (Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2013). As of 2017, 258 million persons or 3.4 percent of the world's population lived outside of their countries of birth (United Nations 2017). The increase in global mobility since World War II has produced a vast scholarship on international migration, the large majority of which focuses on emigration and immigrant integration into receiving societies (Castles et al. 2013; Massey et al. 1999; Portes and Rumbaut 2014). Yet, international migration is not a one-way flow. Estimates suggest that about two in five international migrants return to their communities of origin within five years of emigration (Wahba 2015), and most emigrants depart with the goal of one day going back home (Battistella 2018; Stark 1991). However, despite the frequency of return migration, scholarship on the topic remains limited, focusing primarily on return migrants' contributions to economic development (Cassarino 2004; De Haas 2010). In this paper, we draw on eight years of fieldwork and 153 in-depth interviews conducted throughout the historic migrant-sending state of Guanajuato, Mexico, to develop a sociological model of return labor migration, which situates the processes of return and labor market reintegration within individual and community contexts.

Motivated by escalating return migration scholars are increasingly investigating the labor market reintegration of migrants into their home communities. Much of this scholarship assesses the ways in which return migrants mobilize resources they acquire abroad, such as human and financial capital, to achieve mobility upon return (Cassarino 2008; Hagan, Hernández-León, and Demonsant 2015; Hagan and Wassink 2016; Mesnard and Ravallion 2006). By and large, these studies rely on economic models of international migration to understand the process of labor market reintegration (Harris and Todaro 1970; Massey et al. 1999; Stark 1991), but resource mobilization and labor market reintegration unfold in heterogeneous social contexts. As we

argue in this paper, migrants' acquisition and mobilization of human and financial capital is shaped by their life-course stages and the characteristics of the communities to which they return. Existing models of international migration, which were developed to predict emigration, not return, are ill-equipped to capture the complexity of return migration and labor market reintegration (Cassarino 2004; De Haas 2010). A consideration of individual and community contexts is particularly important in the contemporary era as international migrants are returning to a diverse set of countries with widely varying levels of development and disparate labor market opportunities (Battistella 2018; Wahba 2015).

Our Contextual Model of Return Labor Migration or CRLM views return migrants' labor market reintegration as social processes that unfold across the migratory circuit – before, during, and after migration. CRLM recognizes that migrants have agency and thus their labor market plans evolve as they gain information, acquire resources, and transition through life-course stages. Our model also recognizes how origin contexts may influence migrants as they evaluate economic opportunities at home and decide when and how to return. Specifically, we investigate and contrast migration strategies, resource mobilization, and pathways to economic mobility among Mexican return migrants across three types of communities that vary by social, economic, and spatial context: urban, rural and proximate to urban areas, and rural and isolated. By placing the process of labor market reintegration in local context, CRLM provides a new theoretical lens through which to understand how international migration interacts with and sometimes disrupts entrenched systems of inequality characteristic of many sending regions around the world (Portes and Hoffman 2003; Ravallion 2014). At the same time, we recognize the durability of economic structures that can frustrate migrants' pursuit of labor market mobility in economically constrained origin communities (De Haas 2010).

To situate our analysis, we first review the scholarship on inequality and economic mobility in Mexico. We then integrate theories of international migration with patterns of economic mobility in low-to-middle-income countries (LMICs). Next, we describe our data and profile our migrant sample. We then assess variations in return migration and labor market mobility across life-course stages and disparate local contexts of return. In conclusion, we offer four propositions which distill the implications of our model into a set of actionable hypotheses that may guide future global research on return migration. We also reflect on the implications of our model in a world where heightened border and interior enforcement contribute to a growing rate of involuntary return and declining circular migration (Hollifield, Martin, and Orrenius 2014; Roberts, Menjívar, and Rodríguez 2017).

INEQUALITY AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY IN MEXICO

The Mexican labor market is highly stratified. A small, well-educated professional class sits at the top of Mexico's income bracket, while the majority of the workforce (65 percent in 2010) occupies the informal sector, a conglomeration of independent workers and small firms that are not formally registered, regulated, or taxed (Huerta-Wong, Burak, and Grusky 2013; Portes and Hoffman 2003; Tornarolli et al. 2014). At the turn of the twentieth century, while the rest of Latin America saw increases in inter-class fluidity, inter and intra-generational mobility declined in Mexico, driven by economic restructuring, a move toward liberalization and global integration, and growth in informal sector work (Parrado 2005; Portes and Hoffman 2003). Entry into the professional class depends largely on inherited social class and formal education, which tend to go hand-in-hand (Cortés and Latapí 2005; Marteleto et al. 2012). Indeed, a series of major educational reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, which expanded access to primary and lower-

secondary school (similar to junior high in the United States), had the unexpected consequence of strengthening the link between parental class and child's completion of upper-secondary school (high school) (Urbina 2018).

Economic opportunities among less educated workers are limited. Those who complete lower- or upper-secondary school can get formal sector jobs in large businesses or the many international factories that dot the Mexican landscape, generally located on the outskirts of major population centers (Rodriguez 2016). Positions in factories provide formal sector health benefits and some job stability, but at the cost of monotonous assembly line work, low entry wages, and limited mobility opportunities (Heredia 1996; Rodriguez 2016).¹ Other entry-level jobs in the formal sector, such as receptionists, security guards, clerks, and delivery drivers, also offer benefits and job stability, but to achieve significant wage or occupational mobility in the formal sector, workers generally require a college degree (Huerta-Wong et al. 2013; Parrado 2005).

Mexicans with fewer than nine years of schooling are largely relegated to the informal economy, the largest economic sector in most Latin American countries (Tornarolli et al. 2014). Informal sector firms do not provide health insurance, pensions, severance pay, or written contracts, and generally employ fewer than five workers (Levy 2008; Perry et al. 2007). Because of the precarious working conditions and low and stagnant wages in the informal sector of the labor market, scholars generally view self-employment as the primary upward mobility pathway

¹ Since the passage of the North American Free Trade Association, Mexico has attracted many German, U.S., Canadian, and Japanese manufacturing firms. For example, Guanajuato, where we conducted our research, houses hundreds of U.S. and Japanese automotive manufacturers (Rodriguez 2016).

available to Mexican workers with low levels of education (Balán, Browning, and Jelin 1973; Maloney 2004; Stark 1991). Workers with little schooling who do not launch successful businesses have few alternatives and generally resort to long-term low-wage work in the informal sector or turn to survival self-employment as an option of last resort (Wassink and Hagan 2018). In 2010, 28 percent of economically active Mexicans were self-employed, including more than 40 percent of informal sector workers (Tornarolli et al. 2014). Business formation offers an opportunity to maximize returns to social and technical skills that laborers often accumulate on the job across their careers (Hagan et al. 2015). In a broader sense, successful entrepreneurship among workers with little schooling signals a disruption of Mexico's intransigent class structure and an opportunity for low-wage workers to forge their own mobility pathways (Portes and Hoffman 2003). Indeed, a recent journal issue on self-employment in Latin America found that among workers from middle- and lower-class backgrounds, self-employment was associated with significantly higher rates of inter- and intra-generational mobility relative to wage labor (Castellani and Lora 2014).

However, low-wages and inefficient credit markets in Mexico constrain start-up prospects for many workers (Balán et al. 1973; Stark 1991).² With limited access to loans, workers must wait until they accumulate the skills and funds necessary for tools, workspace,

² The 2018 report from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor identifies Latin America and Africa as the least supportive structural environments for early stage entrepreneurs. According to a report from the Inter-American Development Bank that included Mexico, 80 percent of Latin American entrepreneurs rely on personal savings as the primary source of financing for their businesses (Kantis 2005).

vehicles, and other capital inputs required to launch a business. These long-term strategies which can stretch across family formation processes and life course stages are inherently risky because informal sector workers are vulnerable to many unexpected hurdles such as sudden layoffs and unexpected expenses that can destabilize low-income households (Balán et al. 1973; González de la Rocha 1994). Consequently, any analysis of labor market mobility in Mexico or other developing regions must account for how life course stages interact with economic conditions and prospects.

Local context also shapes employment prospects and opportunities for business formation in Mexico, a country characterized by sizeable disparities in development and workforce composition (CONAPO 2010; Wassink 2018). Disparities in community size, level of development, and transportation infrastructure affect local employment opportunities and affect entrepreneurs' exposure to prospective consumers (Durand, Parrado, and Massey 1996; Tybout 2000). Rural/urban variations in labor market activity provide a simple yet powerful illustration of the consequences of local context for economic opportunities. Figure 1 summarizes Mexico's workforce distribution among working-age adults by community size using the 2010 decennial Mexican Census, a nationally representative 10 percent population sample. In communities with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, which still include one quarter of the population, half of all workers are in agriculture and half of non-agricultural workers are self-employed without employees, a marginal status that often masks unemployment (Gindling and Newhouse 2014; Levy 2008). By contrast, in the largest urban areas, agricultural employment nears zero, formal employment

approaches 50 percent, and the prevalence of salaried consumers creates opportunities for a growing proportion of workers to open non-agricultural businesses with employees.³

Among rural communities, spatial context also matters. In the 1980s and 1990s, Mexico's national development program was reorganized around a regional model that featured a number of large cities throughout the country (Portes and Roberts 2005). As such, a growing proportion of less developed rural Mexican communities are adjacent to rapidly developing urban centers. These communities, which are rural in terms of population size, but proximate to larger more developed areas are different from their rural and isolated counterparts in two important ways. First, proximity to urban areas expands employment opportunities through large firms located in and around cities. Second, although rural communities may remain internally undeveloped, proximity to urban centers creates shared infrastructure, including access to transportation networks, which are essential for small manufacturing businesses that rely on the easy shipment of goods to factories and distribution centers (Durand et al. 1996).

Although educational attainment and variations in local context structure labor market opportunities, individuals are not without agency (Giddens 1986). In Mexico, as in other LMICs around the world, one of the most prevalent responses to local economic constraints is migration. The Bracero program, which began in the 1940s, initiated a large-scale pattern of circular migration between Mexico and the United States as Mexicans from primarily rural and agrarian communities traveled back and forth to work in seasonal agricultural jobs in the United States (Garip 2016). As U.S. migration became embedded in the fabric of Mexican society over the

³ Mexico's rural/urban disparities mirror similar variations by country income-level throughout the developing world (Gindling and Newhouse 2014).

next half century, it provided more than just a source of higher wages. Mexicans began to deploy U.S.-migration as a strategy to overcome inefficiencies in local labor markets and recoup the opportunities that were lost during the country's economic restructuring and economic crises (Hernández-León 2008; Portes and Hoffman 2003; Stark 1991).

While circular migration has long been characteristic of the U.S.-Mexico system, the great recession, improving economic opportunities in some Mexican states, and increased interior and border enforcement by the U.S. Government escalated voluntary and forced return migration to Mexico, resulting in the return of 2.5 million Mexican migrants between 2005-2014 (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015). As return migrants increasingly opt to settle in Mexico rather than re-migrate to the United States (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2015), we consider the intersection between time spent working abroad and economic mobility upon return.

THEORIZING RETURN MIGRATION AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY IN COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT

Research attempting to understand return migration and economic mobility in Mexico and elsewhere relies on the two dominant theoretical perspectives developed to explain international labor migration: the neoclassical economic model and the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM). The neoclassical model views international migration as a response to wage differentials between sending and receiving communities (Harris and Todaro 1970). From the neoclassical perspective, migrants only return home if they fail to achieve desired wages abroad and migration experience is not expected to affect economic mobility upon return.

Yet, subsequent studies revealed that accumulation of resources such as financial capital while abroad predicted higher odds of certain labor market outcomes including self-employment

in origin communities (Dustmann 1999; Massey and Parrado 1998; Mesnard and Ravallion 2006). As a result, scholars proposed the NELM, which contends that individuals migrate to overcome specific challenges in their origin labor markets (Stark 1991). In particular, the NELM suggests that workers who hope to start businesses but lack access to capital due to inefficient credit markets migrate abroad to accumulate start-up funds (Lindstrom 1996). Given the centrality of self-employment to economic mobility in LMICs, migrants' savings could inject a modicum of mobility into otherwise stratified labor markets.

More recent research builds on the NELM to document the ways in which non-financial human capital skills that migrants acquire abroad affect their mobility upon return (Démurger and Xu 2011; Hernández-León 2008). Hagan et al. (2015), for example, found that Mexican migrants commonly accumulate technical, social, and English language skills while working in the United States and apply them to their work in Mexico. The accumulation of new skills while abroad increases the likelihood of upward occupational mobility or initiating businesses upon return (Cobo, Giorguli, and Alba 2010; Hagan and Wassink 2016). Consistent with the NELM, scholarship on migration and human capital formation suggests that migrants' mobility upon return results from their accumulation of new resources while working abroad. Yet, as Wassink and Hagan (2018) showed, unexpected human capital formation can also direct return migrants to new and often unexpected mobility pathways, demonstrating that return migrants' economic mobility is not always the result of well-planned goals made prior to migration.

The NELM recognizes the centrality of local context to the initiation and evolution of migration (Hamilton and Villarreal 2011; Massey et al. 1999; Massey and Espinosa 1997). Scholars observe systematic variation in the rate of departure and length of time spent abroad as a result of differences in labor market opportunities in sending communities (Lindstrom 1996).

For example, most migrants from agrarian communities engage in regular short-term trips, indicative of long-term economic dependence on migration (Garip 2016). In contrast, migrants from economically dynamic urban areas and adjacent rural ranchos generally undertake one or two extended trips, perhaps reflecting resource accumulation strategies to enable self-employment upon return (Hernández-León 2008; Lindstrom 1996).

Social context in sending communities also affects migration (Massey et al. 1999). In Mexico, the social pressure to migrate to the United States varies widely. In isolated rural areas with limited labor market opportunities, U.S.-migration often gains a momentum of its own as residents – especially young men – come to view regular U.S.-work as their best chance at economic mobility and sometimes a rite of passage (Kandel and Massey 2002; Mines and de Janvry 1982). By contrast, more recent urban migrants, both women and men, often travel abroad in search of adventure and opportunity, some without clearly defined long-term goals (Hernández-León 2008).

Despite the scholarly consensus that social, economic, and spatial context at origin impacts migration plans, missing from the migration literature is a consideration of the ways in which opportunities in sending communities shape returnees' labor market reintegration. This absence is surprising given the centrality of local context to labor market opportunities in LMICs (Gindling and Newhouse 2014; Wassink 2018), and the well-documented role of place when it comes to immigrants' labor market incorporation in receiving societies (Portes and Böröcz 1989; Portes and Rumbaut 2014). In this paper, we extend the importance of local context to the return migration experience by investigating and contrasting migration strategies, resource mobilization, and pathways to economic mobility among Mexican return migrants across three

types of communities that vary by social, economic, and spatial context: urban, rural and proximate to urban areas, and rural and isolated.⁴

Our research approach challenges the underlying assumption of rational behavior inherent to most theories of labor migration. In our analysis we emphasize the reflexive nature of cognition and illustrate the dynamic character of decision-making that is oriented toward the future but informed by the past (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Although individuals may migrate with well thought-out goals in mind, they may also adjust those targets in response to new information. Exposure to new situations and ways of doing things encourages and even necessitates creative and often unplanned responses as actors reorient their plans to reflect changing circumstances (Joas 1996). For example, the acquisition of new skills acquired in foreign labor markets may reorient some migrants away from income-maximizing strategies that motivated their departures and toward new and never-before considered entrepreneurial opportunities (Wassink and Hagan 2018). If we accept that migrants are reflexive agents whose future plans are informed by the past, then their reorientations should be informed not just by resource acquisition, but also by their prior experiences in (and subjective understandings of) their origin labor markets.

Labor market and migration strategies also respond to life course stages and events. The life-course framework, which emphasizes the intersection of individual and historical context

⁴ We planned to include political context in our analysis. However, we found no evidence that government reception affected labor market reentry. None of our respondents had participated in reintegration programs and only a handful knew of these fledgling initiatives (on the limitations of reintegration programs, see Roberts, Menjívar, and Rodríguez 2017).

(Elder 1985), has become an increasingly important lens for research on international migration (Jasso 2003; Massey et al. 1999). Scholars studying Mexican migration to and from the United States identify two primary migration phases among Mexican migrants traveling to the United States (Massey et al. 1987). The first phase occurs prior to family formation as young workers travel abroad in search of higher wages and new opportunities, often with the aim of building a home upon return. The second takes place later in life, when the need to provide for school-age children increases the appeal of U.S. wages. Life course and family contexts create important and often contradictory motivations for migrants while they are sojourning abroad. On the one hand, the tug of family may motivate migrants to return home earlier than planned (Sandoval 2013; Van Hook and Zhang 2011), but on the other hand, economic dependents create financial pressure to maintain steady income, which is most easily done by remaining abroad.

Life course timing (both individual age and cohort membership) may also affect migrants' labor market opportunities in origin communities. Mexico enacted a series of major educational expansions during the 1980s, which culminated in the passage of the National Agreement to Modernize Basic Education in 1992 that made completion of lower-secondary school mandatory. These reforms created a significant cohort gradient in educational attainment. Most working-class Mexicans born before the 1980s did not complete secondary school and consequently have more limited access to salaried formal sector employment (Jütting, Parlevliet, and Xenogiani 2008; Perry et al. 2007). Increased education creates an expanded set of labor market opportunities for younger Mexicans, which includes employment in large formal sector businesses and potentially completion of university degrees. These inter-cohort disparities in educational attainment are exacerbated by informal sector employers' preferences for younger more physically fit workers. (Balán et al. 1973; Wassink and Hagan 2018). Given age

discrimination in the informal sector, it is not surprising that older workers, including elderly return migrants, often rely on self-employment not just as a mobility pathway, but also as an alternative to unemployment (Perry et al. 2007; Wassink and Hagan 2018). Older migrants who anticipate these limited employment opportunities but also face the pressure to provide for dependent family members, may be more likely than their younger counterparts to prepare for labor market reintegration while still living abroad (e.g., by accumulating resources to invest in businesses upon return).

SITE SELECTION, RESEARCH DESIGN, AND SAMPLE PROFILE

Site Selection and Research Design

This analysis is based on a longitudinal and multi-site data collection process that developed over eight years. Drawing on the grounded approach to data collection and theory building, each round of fieldwork raised new questions that suggested the need for additional research (Charmaz 2014). The ongoing project is based in Guanajuato, a historic migrant-sending state with 5.5 million inhabitants, situated in west-central Mexico. Guanajuato is home to many rural communities with long histories of U.S.-migration, along with a number of large, industrial urban areas with northbound migrant streams that emerged during Mexico's economic restructuring in the 1990s (Arias 2004; Hagan et al. 2015; Hernandez Leon 2015).

Our analysis draws on three rounds of data collection that varied by theoretical interest, methodology, and location. The first wave in 2010 was intended to capture human capital transfers across the migratory circuit and their implications for labor market mobility in the United States and upon return to Mexico. Recognizing the greater opportunities to learn and apply new skills in urban areas relative to rural communities (Hernández-León 2008), the initial

data was strategically collected in León, a large industrial city with 1.6 million inhabitants, located in the center of Guanajuato. Following 70 exploratory interviews in the state of Guanajuato in 2009, a research team administered a semi-structured survey to 200 return migrants in Leon (Hagan et al. 2015). We used the 2010 Mexican Census to identify census tracts (*manzanas*) with high concentrations of return migrants. We then visited a total of 77 *manzanas* to obtain our sample of 200 return migrants. The 2010 survey included a combination of close- and open-ended questions, which captured migration histories, job histories, and the accumulation of human and financial capital across the migratory circuit.

Seeking to understand return migrants' long-term reintegration, we returned to Leon in 2015 and conducted follow-up interviews with respondents whom we were able to locate from the original sample. Ultimately, we reached and interviewed about half of the original sample (N=92). The follow-up interviews included questions about the labor market and migration histories of the return migrants between 2010 and 2015, which provided a longitudinal lens into the experience of labor market reintegration upon return to a large urban area.

Recognizing that return migrants' labor market reintegration could vary by local context, we returned to Guanajuato in 2017 and conducted 60 interviews in nine small-to-midsize communities.⁵ Although we conducted most of the interviews with return migrants themselves, in two small communities where more than half of the men were in the United States on

⁵ We identified potential communities with large return migrant populations using the Mexican Census and with guidance from contacts at the University of Guanajuato. We then purposively sampled rural communities that varied by local development, population, and spatial context.

temporary guest worker visas, we interviewed left-behind family members about the household and labor market dynamics surrounding circular migration.⁶

Table 1 profiles the 10 research sites, which we organized into three community types: urban, rural and proximate, and rural and isolated.⁷ The community profiles include measures of population size, educational attainment, and local development from Mexico's National Population Council's 2010 Index of Marginalization.⁸ Because economic opportunities and international migration in rural communities are affected by proximity to urban areas (Hamilton and Villarreal 2011), we grouped the rural communities into two categories that capture spatial context: rural and proximate and rural and isolated. All of the rural and proximate communities were accessible by major paved roads and most were adjacent to major urban areas. In contrast, the two rural and isolated communities were 39 and 61 minutes from their respective city centers.⁹ To access the isolated communities, we traveled heavily rutted dirt roads which are regularly impassible during the rainy season. As Table 1 shows, the rural communities varied significantly in terms of population size, educational attainment, and development, capturing a wide array of contextual factors that may affect return migrants labor market reintegration.

To further understand how individual and community contexts shape the labor market experiences of return migrants, we constructed biographical narratives for each of our

⁶ More details about our interviews and the questionnaires used are available upon request.

⁷ We use pseudonyms for all of the rural localities.

⁸ Localities, which are nested within municipalities, are the smallest geographical units of aggregation available in the Mexican Census.

⁹ We estimated drive time with Google Maps and corroborated the estimates over repeated visits.

respondents. These biographical narratives integrate work histories, family and social contexts, financial capital accumulation, human capital formation, and life-course stages across the migratory circuit. We constructed the narratives independently of our contextual framework, but then organized them by community type and life course stage. This inductive strategy revealed expected but also surprising ways in which international migration, labor market reintegration, and resource mobilization respond to family and community contexts.

Sample Profile

Table 2 profiles our respondents by community type. At our last interview, most of our respondents were in their forties and married with children, characteristics we would expect of contemporary Mexican return migrants (Masferrer and Roberts 2012). The predominance of men in the sample reflects the gendered nature of Mexico-U.S. migration; Mexican women are more likely than men to settle permanently in the United States and men account for 9/10 migrants deported to Mexico (Roberts et al. 2017; Ruiz-Tagle and Wong 2009; Van Hook and Zhang 2011). We observed significantly lower educational attainment among our rural and isolated respondents, which may reflect pressure on youth to contribute to the household economy in agrarian contexts where many families rely primarily on their own production for subsistence (Moreno-Brid and Ros 2009).¹⁰ As Table 2 shows, almost all of our respondents worked prior to migration.

¹⁰ Early educational exit may also reflect the deeply entrenched migration traditions in our two rural and isolated sites.

Although most of our respondents across our research sites first migrated to the United States in their late teens and early twenties, their subsequent migration trajectories differed by community type. About half of the urban respondents only migrated once and the others on average migrated only two or three times. Almost all of our urban respondents entered the United States without authorization, reflecting the nascent urban flow from Mexico to the United States, which emerged during the 1990s in the midst of Mexico’s “great migration” (Garip 2016; Hernández-León 2008). By contrast, 83 percent of those in rural and proximate communities, and all but one of our rural and isolated respondents, migrated multiple times, with most engaging in circular migration over many years. A much higher proportion of the rural migrants, especially in the two isolated communities, traveled to the United States with H2 guest-worker visas. The predominance of legal migration in these communities reflects their mature migration flows and established personal and employer networks in the United States.

Reasons for migration also varied by community type. Although economic factors and a desire for opportunity were the most commonly cited factors, nearly a third of the urban respondents migrated to learn or in pursuit of self-improvement.¹¹ What did not feature prominently in reasons for migration is what NELM scholars refer as target earnings—migration with the intention of using U.S. savings to start a business upon return. Many of our respondents did invest remitted financial capital in businesses upon return, but very few attributed their initial departures to planned investments, even in hindsight.

¹¹ These motivation could reflect the growth in migration among urban Mexicans seeking to recoup opportunities lost during the country’s economic restructuring in the 1990s (Hagan, Hernández-León, and Demonsant 2015; Hernández-León 2008).

Table 2 also highlights variations in reasons for returning home across the three community types. Consistent with other recent studies (Hagan et al. 2015; Sandoval 2013; Van Hook and Zhang 2011), family unity was the most commonly cited reason for returning home among both urban and rural and proximate respondents. Among the rural and isolated respondents, most of whom migrated as H2 guest workers, expiration of their temporary visas was the most important factor reported. For these guest workers, their coming and going hinges not just on competing economic and familial pressures, but also on the success of their annual visa applications. Fifteen percent of our respondents in urban and rural and proximate areas were deported with formal orders from the United States and a number of others attributed their returns to fear of deportation or discrimination. Despite recent evidence that the decline in Mexico-U.S. migration and increase in return migration was driven in large part by the Great Recession (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015; Villarreal 2014), only a handful of the respondents attributed their returns to U.S. job loss.

RESULTS

We now turn to our results and identify and describe patterns of labor market mobility and resource mobilization upon return in each of the community types: urban, rural and proximate, and rural and isolated. The first three sections engage with Table 3, which summarizes respondents' labor market statuses, industrial profiles, and resource mobilization by community type. In the fourth section, we identify and discuss ways in which migrants adapt their labor market strategies to changing life course contexts.

Mobility Opportunities in a Dynamic Urban Context

Table 3 highlights a diverse array of mobility pathways among our urban respondents. With the exception of two returnees who lived in a rural hamlet on the city's edge, all of the urban returnees entered the non-agricultural workforce. Many of the urban return migrants found jobs as entry-level workers and heavy machinery operators in the city's dominant shoe and leather manufacturing industry. Others found entry-level and supervisory jobs in the area's automotive factories and adjacent industrial park, which produces automotive parts. Others opened small businesses in manufacturing, construction, commerce, and services, where they produced goods either to sell in the city's open-air flea markets or to sell to wealthy residents in *privadas*. Others worked in retail where they mobilized English language capital to serve tourists and business travelers. And still returned to school to complete four-year college degrees.

As the bottom panel of Table 3 highlights, skill mobilization was critical to labor market mobility in Leon. More than half of the urban respondents invested human capital—social, technical, or English language skills—gained in the United States in their work upon return. Yet, in contrast to the NELM, which views international migration as a strategy to accumulate financial capital to invest in economic mobility upon return (Lindstrom and Lauster 2001), only 21 percent of our urban respondents invested U.S.-savings into their work in Leon. Building on recent research (Hagan et al. 2015), we found that urban areas like Leon privilege human capital transfers. Their dynamic industrial bases and large diverse populations encourage creative entrepreneurship outside traditional industry niches.

The most common mobility pathway that emerged from skills transfers was entrepreneurship. As Table 3 highlights, almost 20 percent of the urban return migrants started businesses with employees. Three returnees opened auto shops, using U.S.-machinery and

techniques to improve the quality of their work. Others drew on their U.S. work experience to open restaurants that sold American and Tex-Mex food or opened stores that carried U.S. brands and styles. In these cases, new skills learned abroad enabled return migrants to distinguish themselves from local businesses or to branch out and establish new niches in the Leon economy (Hagan and Wassink 2016).

Take the case of Jose, a self-employed carpenter who migrated to the United States in 2000 in order to improve his family's economic situation and expand his business. In the U.S. labor market, Jose found work as a carpenter. In this job, he reskilled, learning to work with new technology. When Jose returned to settle in Leon in 2009, the city was experiencing an economic boom in its Building and Construction Trades. With new tools, techniques, and ideas, Jose carved a niche in the local economy producing U.S. style cabinetry, which separated him from local competitors. Jose initially struggled to sell his high-end wares to the residents of his working-class neighborhood. But, over time he strategically started selling his products in up-scale *privadas*. When we re-interviewed Jose in 2015, he had expanded his carpentry business and hired three employees.

Others, like Pablo, drew on English-language skills learned in the United States to launch service-sector ventures catering to foreign business persons traveling to Leon to purchase or market shoe and leather products. Pablo migrated to the United States as a teenager, leaving behind his unfinished secondary education and long days working in his family's in-home shoe factory. He attended a U.S. high school, where he became fluent in English. After working as a receptionist in a Mexican restaurant in the United States, Pablo returned to Leon for family reasons. Upon surveying Leon's labor market, he decided to purchase a taxi. Because of his

English language skills, he has a large and diverse customer base and can charge more than the going rate.

Among our urban respondents, returns to transferred technical skills acquired in the United States were largely limited to self-employment for two reasons. First, it is easier to apply new technologies to entrepreneurship than attempting to alter existing processes in wage work under the supervision of an employer or manager. For this reason, we found that technical skill transfers actually encourage entrepreneurship. Second, the unregulated structure of informal sector work in Mexico limits returns to skills in largely unregulated industries such as construction and small-scale manufacturing, which are common areas of skill formation among Mexicans in the United States (Hagan et al. 2015).¹² Social and English-language skills proved easier than technical ones to mobilize in wage work. These competences created opportunities for returnees to secure employment in restaurants, stores, hotels, and other businesses that cater to English-speaking travelers. In order for English language and social skills to lead to economic mobility, they must be recognized and valorized by employers. As we found, through interviews with return migrants and local employers, English language and customer service skills are most often rewarded in large industrial cities like Leon, as well as popular destinations for international tourists, such as nearby San Miguel de Allende, which cater to large English-speaking populations. The limited returns to technical skills among wage workers may explain

¹² One respondent used technical skills gained in the United States to secure a position as a floor supervisor in a large car manufacturing plant. However, his experience was exceptional because he participated in an accredited training program while in the United States. Thus, he was able to provide evidence of his expertise.

why scholars find little to no effect of U.S. work experience on wages in Mexico (Reinhold and Thom 2013).

Interestingly, financial remittances played a secondary role in our respondents' formation of urban businesses. Although accumulated savings often enable the initiation of new ventures (Démurger and Xu 2011; Massey and Parrado 1998; Mesnard and Ravallion 2006), skills learned abroad, more than financial capital, allow urban returnees to establish new economic niches. By distinguishing themselves from local competitors, return migrant entrepreneurs like Jose and Pablo gain critical leverage in a competitive urban market. In this way, new skills more often than savings, led to upward mobility among our urban respondents (see also, Wassink and Hagan 2018).¹³ For return migrants without new skills to distinguish their enterprises, labor market saturation combined with a broad array of opportunities for wage work discouraged the formation of conventional enterprises except as a last resort against unemployment.¹⁴ We found that international migration primarily impacts economic mobility in urban areas through return migrants' investment of human capital acquired abroad into entrepreneurship upon return.

¹³ Several of our younger urban respondents invested remitted savings in college degrees. While we were unable to systematically assess the prevalence or pre-meditation of this strategy, completion of advanced degrees may represent an important and underexplored mobility strategy among return migrants who accumulate substantial financial capital while working abroad.

¹⁴ In their assessment of human capital transfers and business formation among urban return migrants, Hagan and Wassink (2016) found that return migration without the transfer of new skills was associated with 65% lower odds of operating a business relative to non-migrants.

Constrained Mobility in Rural and Proximate Communities

Like their urban counterparts, our respondents in rural and proximate communities held a variety of labor market statuses. But, as Table 3 shows, these migrants were more likely than their urban counterparts to operate small businesses or work in low-wage jobs in services, construction, and manufacturing. Within the service sector, we found a number of rural and proximate migrants who operated small in-home convenience stores (*abarrotes*), which provide fresh produce, non-perishable goods, and other sundries to residents in their local communities. Others launched small-scale retail enterprises selling paper goods, hardware, or other items. However, outside of retail, we found very few service-oriented enterprises, reflecting small and impoverished populations unable to sustain taxi drivers, auto mechanics, and other service providers, like those we encountered in Leon. In poor Mexican communities, residents rely primarily on public transportation, construct their homes, and repair their cars because they cannot afford to pay for these services (González de la Rocha 1994).

In contrast to dynamic urban areas, these more limited and impoverished environments privilege financial remittances, while limiting returns to accumulated human capital. As Table 3 shows, financial remittances often led to economic mobility in rural and proximate communities. Almost three quarters of our rural and proximate respondents used financial remittances for investment upon return, in stark contrast to only 21 percent of our urban respondents. Financial savings and transfers were central to business formation in rural and proximate communities. Out of the 17 respondents who started small businesses upon return, 13 relied on financial savings amassed in the United States. For workers with little schooling in these constrained economic settings, business formation is often the only pathway out of low-wage informal sector wage jobs (Balán et al. 1973; Jütting et al. 2008). In Mexico, where inefficient credit markets limit access to

start-up capital, migration can provide a key financial boost for informal sector workers looking to launch their own enterprises (Massey and Parrado 1998; Parrado and Gutierrez 2016).

Two of our rural and proximate communities, Ojo de Agua and San José de San Isidro, illustrate this process. The dominant manufacturing industry in each community is brickmaking. Adjacent to each town are about two dozen large ovens where residents bake thousands of bricks every day. Most oven owners employ a handful of *ayudantes* (apprentices), who mix and shape the bricks using a proprietary mixture of straw, mud, and locally-sourced manure. Self-employed brickmaking is not a lucrative career, but owners of the ovens keep a significantly larger share of the profits than their *ayudantes* receive. Thus, the construction of an oven leads to a modest increase in earnings.

Tomas's case illustrates how U.S. savings enabled many of our respondents to transition from informal sector wage workers to small business owners, often in the same industry in which they labored prior to migration. Tomas began working in his uncle's tile-making business after just three years of primary school. After 19 years working for his uncle, Tomas migrated to the United States. Like other migrants we interviewed in rural and proximate communities, migration to the United States was a strategy to escape the family business. Tomas migrated twice, most recently from 2009 to 2016. By 2016, he felt the tug to rejoin his wife and three school-aged children in Mexico. Motivated by the economic responsibility to provide for his family and the limited employment prospects for someone with his education, Tomas saved a portion of his U.S. earnings to start a brick-making business. Upon return, he invested 8,000 pesos (about \$500) in his own oven. Although his earnings in Mexico do not approach his U.S. wages, as a self-employed brick maker Tomas brings home more than he did as his uncle's *ayudante* and is finally reunited with his family.

Other migrants, like Ruben, transitioned from wage work in construction or manufacturing to retail. Ruben first went to the United States in 1985 at the age of 15. Over the next 30 years, he migrated regularly, working in construction in the United States. In between migrations, Ruben also married and constructed a home in Mexico. In 2005, as a husband and father, Ruben began to prepare for a permanent return. He initially sent back 50,000 pesos (\$2,500), which his wife used to purchase a property along the highway that runs through their small town. Over the next 10 years, Ruben invested an additional 200,000 pesos to outfit a hardware store. In 2015, he returned permanently. Thanks to their hardware store, Ruben's family is economically stable and no longer relies on migration for income.

Ruben's and Tomas's businesses show how spatial context—proximity to urban areas—enables successful self-employment in rural and proximate communities. Accessibility via major transportation corridors enables Tomas and other small-scale manufacturers to sell their goods by the truckload to regional distributors. Similarly, retail outlets like Ruben's hardware store benefit from state highways that expand their customers to include residents in adjacent ranchos. These contextual features provide critical infrastructure for return migrants to invest savings accumulated abroad in new businesses upon return.

We also encountered a handful of migrants who attempted to use skills learned in the United States to start businesses in their rural and proximate sending communities, but these attempts were largely unsuccessful. Five of the 17 self-employed return migrants in rural and proximate communities described applying U.S. technical or social skills to business ventures, but four eventually curtailed their enterprises to part-time businesses because they lacked

sufficient clientele.¹⁵ Consider Juan who worked in a Chinese restaurant in the United States where he developed extensive cooking skills. Juan returned to San Jacinto with several hundred dollars' worth of cooking equipment: woks, spatulas, and other essential tools for preparing American-style Chinese food, with which he planned to open a Chinese restaurant in his hometown. Yet, upon return Juan opted to limit his restaurant to a supplemental weekend enterprise. As he put it, "San Jacinto is too small and too poor for my business." Juan instead chose to invest the bulk of his U.S. savings in heavy machinery, with which he tills local cropland on a contractual basis.¹⁶ But on the weekends, he and his family can be found dishing out heaping plates of lo mein and General Tso's chicken to their neighbors.

As the cases of Tomas, Ruben, and Juan illustrate, the potential for business expansion in rural and proximate communities is severely limited. Indeed, across 10 years of fieldwork, we encountered only one rural entrepreneur who achieved significant growth in his business—Lilo. When we first interviewed Lilo in 2009, he was operating a small carpentry business using techniques, tools, and savings that he brought back from the United States. At our first interview, Lilo catered primarily to local return migrants who favored U.S. building styles. Recognizing the

¹⁵ With the exception of an isolated instance of several English teachers we encountered in one rural community while conducting exploratory field research, we found no evidence of English-language transfers outside of large urban or tourist areas.

¹⁶ We received similar accounts from three of the other four rural and proximate returnees who attempted or at least planned to apply U.S. skills to their work upon return. Indeed, another returnee also attempted to start a restaurant using cooking skills learned in the United States, but called off the venture citing the same challenges as Juan.

limited consumer power of his rural community, over the next decade Lilo strategically expanded his business by networking in trade organizations, participation in fútbol clubs, and marketing on Facebook. By our third interview in 2018, Lilo had opened two *mueblerias* (furniture stores) in large cities in Guanajuato and had expanded his clientele to 250 regular customers. Lilo's case is an exceptional one, but we include it to illustrate how the local context of rural and proximate communities can constrain the returns to human and financial capital brought from the United States. For Lilo to succeed, he had to build outwards and expand his customers beyond his hometown. Contrasting Lilo's experiences against those of the successful urban entrepreneurs that we interviewed, such as Jose, the self-employed carpenter, and Pablo, the *taxista*, demonstrates the importance of analyzing economic reintegration in local context, a perspective that has been largely absent from recent research on the topic. While Lilo required years of strategic networking and advertising to capitalize on his remitted skills, returnees like Jose were able to rapidly invest their skills into new businesses catering to the large and socioeconomically populated communities of their surrounding communities.

Migrants in rural and proximate communities who did not remit financial savings (even those who accumulated new skills while abroad) often had no choice but to seek low-wage jobs in the informal sector or take entry-level positions in adjacent manufacturing firms that dot the Guanajuato landscape. Consider Victor, one of 13 respondents in rural and proximate communities who found jobs in these manufacturing firms. Victor migrated to the United States when he was 18-years old, after completing high school. In United States, he worked in construction for 12 years, advancing from an unskilled laborer to a foreman earning \$35/hour. In 2012, despite his economic success abroad, Victor returned home because of his mother's failing health. In Victor's poor hometown, there was no demand for the substantial skills he gained

working in the United States. Unwilling to leave his parents and hometown to look for work in a larger city where he might be rewarded for his skills, Victor opted for an assembly line job at a General Motors factory which he found through classified ads. Earning the prevailing entry wage of 1500 pesos per week, Victor, like other returnees we interviewed, voiced frustration with the monotony of assembly line work and limited mobility in what is currently one of the fastest growing industries in Guanajuato (Franco and Moran 2016).¹⁷ Yet, his experience upon return describes the most common trajectory among returnees to rural and proximate communities who did not bring home savings with which to initiate businesses. Those like Victor, who had completed their high school degrees generally found work in area factories, while less educated migrants tended to return to low-wage jobs in agriculture or informal jobs in construction and manufacturing, like the ayudantes who mix and shape bricks in Tomas's small business.

Isolation, Stagnant Mobility, and U.S. Dependence

As Table 3 shows, rurality plus isolation severely constricted industrial diversification in the rural and isolated communities we visited. Take, for example, Los Guajes, a town of 211

¹⁷ Mexican auto manufacturing, which ranks seventh in terms of global production, is organized around five regional clusters, one of which is in Guanajuato. The Guanajuato cluster houses 297 companies, most prominently General Motors, Volkswagen, and Mazda assembly plants (Franco and Moran 2016). Despite the 11 percent growth in wages in this sector from 2011-2015, entry-wages range remained low at 1200-1800 pesos a week (\$60-90), comparable to entry level wages in the informal sector. We validated these wage estimates across dozens of interviews with employers and laborers in both formal and informal sector manufacturing.

residents, which sits high in the hills of western Guanajuato. Although only 10 miles from the highway, it takes at least 35 minutes by car to reach the town via a rutted dirt road. Our second rural and isolated community of less than two hundred residents, Lomas de San Isidro is similarly reachable only by a dirt road, requiring about 45 minutes by car to from the nearest commercial center. Both locales are subsistence communities consisting of small family plots that produce corn and beans primarily for household consumption.

In both towns, spatial context dissuaded prospective entrepreneurs from investing in even modest manufacturing enterprises like the small brickmaking businesses we encountered in Ojo de Agua and San José de Ornelas. Such manufacturing operations are not feasible in communities without an easily accessible transportation infrastructure. The only businesses that we observed in these isolated communities were small sundry stores attached to family homes. Overall, we found no pathways through which resources acquired in the United States contributed to entrepreneurship in these rural and isolated communities.

These communities' spatial isolation also impedes economic mobility via wage work. Unlike the diverse labor market networks in proximate and urban communities that link returnees to a wide variety of informal and formal sector jobs, the social network structure of these isolated communities is very tight, limited primarily to family and neighbors. This network structure, which is common in rural and agrarian communities throughout Latin America, makes it very difficult for members to secure stable employment or achieve occupational mobility (Lomnitz 1977). For residents in the rural and isolated communities that we visited, the only

work outside of agriculture required a treacherous journey on scooters to find informal work as day laborers (*jornaleros*) or domestic workers in the nearest cities.¹⁸

The narratives of Ojo de Agua and San José de Ornelas are classic ones of rural dependence on migration (Delgado-Wise and Marquez 2007; Mines and de Janvry 1982). With no opportunities for entrepreneurship or stable employment, we found no economic returns to human or financial capital.¹⁹ Nearly half of the migrants that we interviewed in these rural and isolated communities chose not to work in Mexico, preferring to live on remittances and U.S.-savings earned through seasonal participation in the H-2A and H-2B guest worker programs.²⁰ In both communities, seasonal guest worker migration is the preferred labor market pathway, but it does not lead to economic mobility, only dependence. In Los Guajes, for example, over a dozen men pile into the back of a van each march and drive eight-hours to a labor recruitment agency in Monterrey, where they apply for H2-visas to work in agriculture, landscaping, or construction in the United States. Successful applicants land stable employment for a 6-8-month period, during which they earn the prevailing minimum state wage. Unsuccessful applicants return home where

¹⁸ Multiple respondents reported significant injuries that resulted from scooter accidents commuting to work.

¹⁹ Respondents invested U.S. savings in home construction, automobiles, and household consumption, which enhance living standards, but do not provide long-term economic mobility.

²⁰ H2-visas are temporary work visas that allow entry into the United States for less than one year to workers in low-skill occupations. Massey (2012) documents a steep increase in receipt of H2-visas among Mexicans, from about 20,000 in 1995 to more than 200,000 in 2010, mirroring the decline in undocumented migration over the same period (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2015).

they subsist off agricultural production or seek low-wage work as day laborers in the nearest cities. The result is a fragile ecosystem in which households hinge on a capricious application process, increasingly based on lotteries and subject to the whims of the Trump Administration (Dance 2018; Hernandez-Leon and Hernandez 2017).

Migration and Mobility across the Life Course

Life-course stages shape the ways in which migrants reorient themselves toward and prepare for opportunities upon return to sending communities. We found that contrary to the predictions of established economic theories of migration, maximizing earnings or achieving a target amount of savings were not the primary factors behind the most recent returns among migrants in our sample. Family unity was the most commonly cited reason for return, along with other factors including discrimination, fear of deportation, and homesickness. To extend the cost-benefit logic of the neoclassical model, which prioritizes cross-national wage differentials, the migrants in our sample returned home when the collective costs of remaining in the United States outweighed the benefits of higher U.S. wages. Yet, while non-economic factors pulled them home, many return migrants did plan for their reintegration into their home community labor markets. Some, for example, shifted away from income maximization toward target savings after deciding to return home. As we demonstrate in this section, migrants' various labor market preparations and mobility pathways upon return were shaped by the timing of returns, cohort membership, and ties to family members in sending communities.²¹

²¹ In this section, we consider the experiences of our 132 respondents who were not deported on their most recent trips to the United States.

Although our respondents who returned in their teens and twenties commonly displayed a cost-benefit approach toward the decision to return, they rarely undertook preparations for labor market reintegration.²² Three factors explain the lack of long-term labor market planning among these young migrants. First, most of the young return migrants had not yet formed their own families. Thus, earnings were rarely saved to provide for economic dependents upon return. Second, because of their youth, these migrants belong to a cohort that benefitted from Mexico's educational reforms. Most had completed primary and some secondary school before migration, which expands labor market opportunities to include a variety of entry-level positions in the formal sector. Finally, these young migrants did not expect to experience discrimination in the Mexican labor market, where employers prefer younger workers (González de la Rocha 1994; Hagan et al. 2015). Consequently, few of our younger respondents worried about finding work upon return and family responsibilities rarely weighed on their decision making. The expectations of these younger migrants proved prescient, but with a caveat.

In both urban and rural and proximate communities, young migrants were generally able to re-enter the jobs they had held prior to migration or to find work in factories, relying on their Mexican education and local social networks, rather than on resources acquired abroad. But, because of their open-ended and largely unplanned approach to reintegration, international migration experience generally only contributed to economic mobility among younger migrants returning to urban areas where they could effectively mobilize skills learned abroad. Unlike financial capital, which must be actively accumulated, saved, and remitted, migrants acquire new

²² The handful of young migrants who traveled abroad with the intention of saving money for college offer an important exception to this pattern.

skills tacitly in foreign workplaces and communities (Hagan et al. 2015; Wassink and Hagan 2018). As we have discussed, urban areas provide opportunities for returnees to invest human capital acquired in the United States into entrepreneurial ventures. These opportunities are largely absent in rural communities.

In contrast to their younger counterparts, migrants who returned in their 30s, 40s, and 50s more often prepared for return. Because of their age, most of these migrants had families in Mexico that were formed before or during their migratory careers. Thus, preparation for return included anticipating the financial needs of dependent family members in Mexico. Moreover, these older migrants who did not benefit from Mexico's educational reforms, anticipated limited labor market opportunities both in the formal sector where businesses impose specific educational requirements and in the informal sector where employers prefer younger workers. As a result, migrants who returned to Mexico later in life often made concrete labor market plans in the United States to ensure their economic stability upon return.

Recall the case of Tomas, the self-employed brick maker. Tomas entered the workforce with just three years of school, and remained a low-wage *ayudante* for the next nineteen years. He first migrated in 2003, *por la necesidad*, leaving behind a wife and several children. Tomas migrated twice, most recently from 2009 to 2016. But after spending the bulk of the twenty-first century in the United States, he decided to return home to rejoin his family. Although Tomas first migrated in search of higher wages, before returning home he saved enough money to start a business in Lomas de San Isidro. Tomas's case illustrates how the labor market reintegration of older migrants follows the target savings approach suggested by the NELM, which accounts for the centrality of household responsibility in migrants' economic strategies. Yet, unlike the NELM, which suggests that target earners depart with business plans already in mind, like

Tomas (and Juan and Ruben), many of our older respondents reoriented away from income-maximizing toward target savings while in the midst of their migratory careers in response to changing life-course contexts and familial responsibilities.

Older respondents who did not return with concrete plans to invest new skills and savings in businesses often struggled to reenter local labor markets, where they lacked the education to obtain formal sector jobs and struggled to find informal sector positions where employers generally prefer younger workers. Their struggles were particularly acute in Leon, where a higher proportion of employment is in the formal sector and greater average education limits opportunities for employment. For example, out of twelve urban respondents who were over age 40 at the time of the interview, had completed fewer than nine years of schooling, and did not apply skills learned in the United States to their work upon return, two returned to low-wage jobs in shoe manufacturing; one subsisted off of a meager monthly pension available to elderly Mexicans; and nine operated marginal businesses in local flea markets or out of their homes. None of our urban respondents who were younger than forty years old operated marginal businesses (regardless of their educational attainment).

The life-course perspective—including timing of departure and return, family formation, and cohort membership—offers limited explanatory power in the analysis of migration and labor market mobility in Los Guajes and Lomas de San Isidro, our two rural and isolated communities. As documented in earlier studies of rural and agrarian communities in Mexico (Massey et al. 1994; Mines 1981; Mines and de Janvry 1982; Wood 2011), circular migration can become the de facto mobility pathway at all stages of the working life course. While residents in urban and rural and proximate areas plan for permanent returns, migrants in more isolated communities set aside money each year for the few months when they will be at home, usually opting not to enter

a local labor market that involves long distance travel and offers meager wages in the informal economy. The result is an extreme version of the neoclassical model in which economic prospects at home are so limited that most return migrants remain oriented toward wage work in the United States, even as the pull of family and community ties them to Mexico. As migrants from large cities and adjacent ranchos shift their orientations from wage work in U.S. labor markets to entrepreneurship and stable employment in sending communities, those in small isolated hamlets sustain their focus on maintaining ties with U.S. employers or developing other strategies to ensure the success of their annual temporary visa applications.

CONCLUSION: A CONTEXTUAL MODEL OF RETURN LABOR MIGRATION

Increasingly, scholars are examining the labor market experiences of return migrants in various global regions, including Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, the EU, Latin America, and the Caribbean (Cassarino 2008; Cobo et al. 2010; Démurger and Xu 2011; Dustmann and Kirchkamp 2002; Hagan and Wassink 2016; Lindstrom 2013; Mezger Kveder and Flahaux 2012; Wassink and Hagan 2018; Williams 2007; Williams and Baláž 2005). This growing scholarship finds that migration experience is associated with higher odds of both upward and downward occupational mobility and entry into self-employment. In other words, labor market reintegration is a complex and uneven process for return migrants. By and large, scholars explain return migrants' divergent labor market trajectories as functions of the different levels of human and financial capital that they acquire abroad and mobilize upon return (Cobo et al. 2010; Démurger and Xu 2011; Mesnard and Ravallion 2006; Wassink and Hagan 2018). Yet, this economic explanation, based on the assumption of rational action underling most theories of labor migration, overlooks the fact that resource mobilization and labor market reintegration unfold in heterogeneous social contexts. As we demonstrated in this paper, migrants' acquisition

and mobilization of human and financial capital is a dynamic social process that is shaped by their life-course stages and the characteristics of the communities to which they return. In this conclusion we draw on our findings to extend four propositions that may guide future research not only on return migration, but also other scholarship that examines complex patterns of mobility that overlap with return migration, including circular, internal, and stepwise migration among different groups of workers throughout the world.

First, local contexts or the characteristics of the communities to which migrants return—i.e., industrial composition, level of development, population size, transportation infrastructure, and proximity to major population centers—constitute the opportunity structures within which migrants mobilize their human and financial capital. Because of their dynamic industrial bases and large diverse populations, urban areas around the globe encourage the mobilization of human capital (Williams 2007). In saturated urban labor markets new technical skills provide entrepreneurs an edge over local competitors, while diverse domestic and international clientele recognize and reward accumulated interpersonal and language skills. Returns to remitted human capital have been documented in urban areas in Turkey, Slovakia, Italy, and Greece (Dustmann 1999; Williams et al. 2004; Williams and Baláž 2005). Rural communities with stable transportation infrastructures and proximity to industrial zones are more likely to encourage the mobilization of financial capital but not human capital (Durand et al. 1996). In these communities, return migrants can invest anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars in small manufacturing operations, agricultural enterprises, or small retail stores that cater to populations in surrounding communities. Evidence shows that remitted savings provide an important boost to entrepreneurs not just in Mexico, but also rural China, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria (Cassarino 2008; Démurger and Xu 2011; Mesnard and Ravallion 2006). In rural and

isolated communities, small impoverished populations and weak transportation infrastructure constrain local labor markets and limit opportunities to invest human or financial capital in new businesses. In these communities, return migrants rely on temporary migration as an economic survival strategy which does not lead to long-term mobility, only dependence.

In direct contrast to economic models that treat migrants' plans as clearly conceived prior to migration (Lindstrom and Lauster 2001; Stark 1991), our second proposition states that migrants labor market plans and decisions are dynamic processes that unfold across the migratory circuit. Although individuals may migrate with well thought-out goals in mind, they often adjust those targets as they acquire new resources and information. To quote Emirbayer and Mische's classic work on human agency (1998:967–68), we found that migrants' "ends and means develop coterminously within contexts that are themselves ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction." Through this process of reevaluation, migrants sometimes shift from income-maximizing to target earning to enable new mobility pathways in origin communities. However, as some of our respondents learned, origin communities are not always conducive to novel and innovative strategies. Consider Juan, who abandoned his plans to open up a full-time Chinese restaurant after recognizing the limitations of a service-oriented enterprise in his rural and working-class hometown. We found, with one exception, that urban areas facilitate and even encourage innovation and the formation of new niches, while rural communities advantage more conventional enterprises. The adaptive nature of our respondents' economic strategies highlights the need to study labor migration and economic reintegration as dynamic processes that unfold across the migratory circuit as migrants acquire new resources and respond to local economic conditions.

Although we investigated reintegration among migrants in their origin communities, our respondents' reflexive decision-making suggests that some returnees may engage in stepwise return migration to maximize the value of their accumulated resources. While Paul (2011:1867), in her analysis of migrant domestic workers, describes stepwise international migration as a strategic process in which migrants select "intermediate destinations" to set up "subsequent moves up their destination hierarchy," our analysis suggests the possibility of a more spontaneous form of stepwise migration among return migrants. For frustrated return labor migrants like Juan and perhaps others such as foreign exchange students returning to rural and less developed sending communities with limited opportunities for professional employment, the inability to effectively mobilize new human capital could motivate relocation either internally or internationally. Although a formal analysis of stepwise return migration exceeds the scope of the present study, it may be of increasing importance as restrictive immigration policies in the United States and Europe traditional patterns of circular migration (Hollifield et al. 2014).

Our third proposition states that migrants' labor market reorientations toward economic opportunities in sending communities respond to their life course stages and are shaped by macro-level institutions and policy changes. Migrants in their teens and twenties often maintained a cost-benefit approach toward migration and rarely undertook preparations for labor market reintegration prior to return. As a result, our younger respondents often returned to the same entry level jobs that they held prior to migration or found work on factory assembly lines or through other large area employers. We attribute this open-ended approach to the absence of responsibility that comes with family formation, as well as the expanded labor market opportunities that younger cohorts received from Mexico's educational expansion. In contrast, migrants who returned in middle-age frequently prepared for their returns prior to leaving the

United States, most often by setting aside money to start a business upon return. These migrants recognized the limited jobs available to older workers with little schooling, while still anticipating the needs of financial dependents. These cross-cohort differences in labor market reintegration demonstrate the importance of considering sending countries' unique historical and political contexts, and how these macro-contextual factors impact the economic opportunity structures that different groups of migrants encounter upon return.

Our fourth proposition states that scholars of international migration need to rethink conventional measures of resource accumulation. Most scholars use proxy indicators such as years spent abroad or cumulative remittances to capture the effect of international migration on economic mobility, entrepreneurship, or local development (e.g., Lindstrom 2013; Massey and Parrado 1998; Mesnard and Ravallion 2006). We found that international migration careers have a temporal logic, which is obscured by these cumulative measures. While abroad, our respondents channeled most of their earnings toward household expenses, but upon deciding to return home, many—particularly those responsible for dependent family members—recalibrated their strategies to include target savings. To capture the true relationship between international migration and domestic labor market mobility, scholars must adapt their measures of resource acquisition to reflect migrants' dynamic and reflexive decision-making processes.²³ Recognizing the dynamic character of international migration could help explain why international migration

²³ Wassink and Hagan (2018) reach a similar conclusion in their analysis of skill accumulation and transfer among urban return migrants. They find that factors such as occupational mobility in the United States and the skill level of last job provide more precise indicators of skill acquisition than aggregate measures of migration experience.

experience is strongly predictive of entrepreneurship, despite evidence from Mexico and Central America that migrants only invest about 1% of their remittances and 7%-20% of their savings into new businesses (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2013).

However, not all migrants have the opportunity to reorient toward sending communities and prepare for labor market reintegration prior to return (Cassarino 2004). A growing proportion of return migrants go home involuntarily due to deportation, job loss, early termination of a visa, or fear of apprehension (Roberts et al. 2017; Schuster 2005). Involuntary return can hinder economic reintegration (Cassarino 2008; Hagan, Wassink, and Castro 2018; Ruben, Van Houte, and Davids 2009). Our contextual model suggests that the consequences of involuntary returns might vary by local context, with the most pronounced effects occurring in rural and less developed communities where limited returns to human capital increase the importance of accumulating target savings prior to return. These consequences may also be more pronounced among certain groups of migrants such as older Mexicans who anticipate limited employment opportunities in their origin communities.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

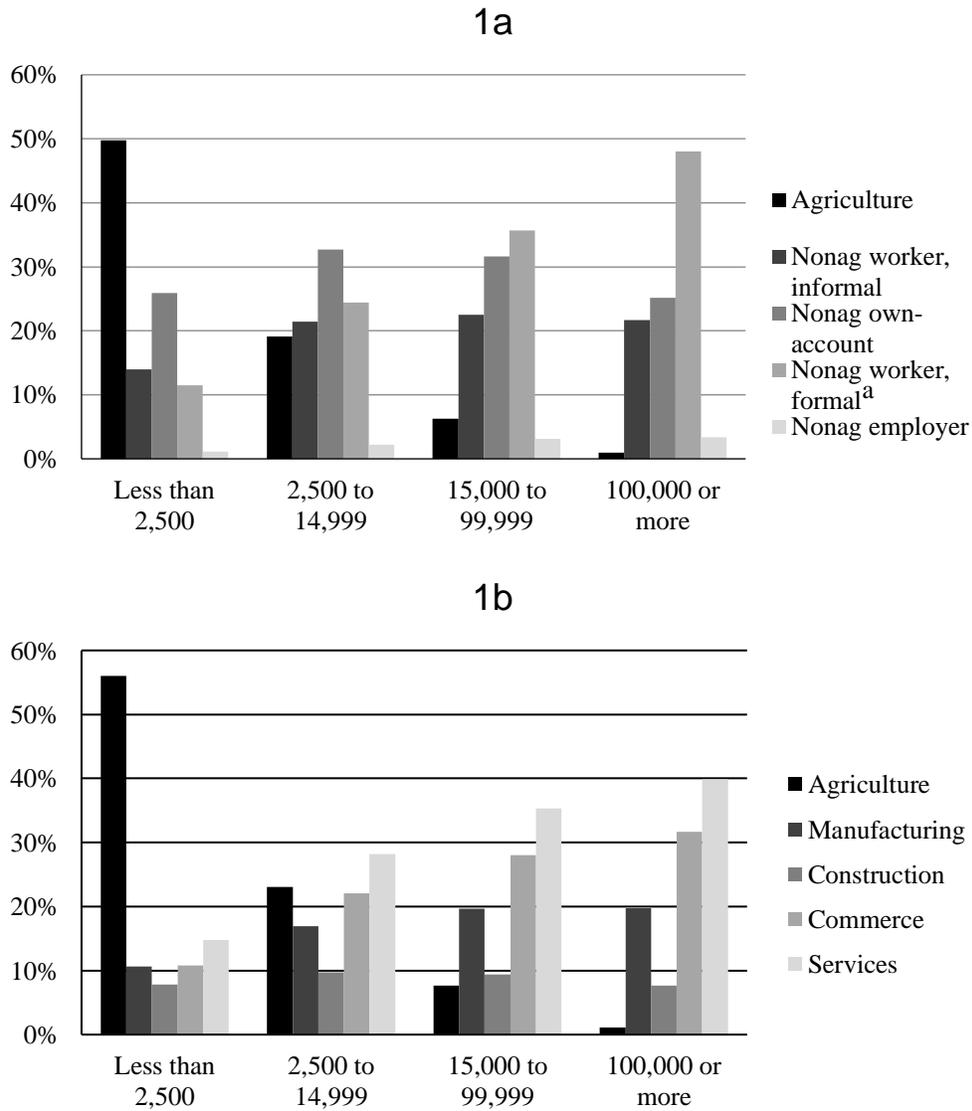


Fig 1. Mexican workforce distribution (1a) and industrial profile (1b) by community size.

Source, 2010 Mexican Census of Population and Housing, n=7,638,288

Nonag = non-agricultural

^a Formal sector employment is measured using the legal definition – receipt of health insurance through employment (Tornarolli et al. 2014)

Table 1 Characteristics of study communities

	Interviews	Inhabitants	%Pop 15+ without primary complete	%Homes with dirt floors	%Homes without refrigerators	Accessible via paved roads	KM from municipal center	Time to municipal center (Minutes)
Urban Community								
Leon	93	1,238,962	16%	2%	7%	Yes	NA	NA
Rural Communities								
<i>Rural and proximate</i>	42	2,119	37%	8%	30%	Yes	11	21
Casa Blanca	7	4,058	39%	4%	16%	Yes	19.8	29
San Miguel Zapotitlán	12	153	18%	0%	6%	Yes	12.3	26
Cuesta de Mezcala	2	4,439	32%	3%	34%	Yes	14.8	28
San Jacinto	5	2,896	34%	12%	24%	Yes	13.1	27
Mezcala	7	1,462	39%	4%	24%	Yes	9.5	20
Ojo de Agua	5	1,186	52%	13%	57%	Yes	3.7	9
San José de Ornelas	4	637	43%	19%	48%	Yes	5.2	10
<i>Rural and isolated</i>	17	202	39%	5%	39%	No	23	50
Los Guajes	13	211	33%	2%	49%	No	21.7	61
Lomas de San Isidro	4	193	45%	8%	28%	No	24.3	39

Source: CONAPO's 2015 Index of Marginalization

Table 2 Respondents' demographic backgrounds, work histories, and migration experiences, 2010-2017

	Urban (n=93)			Rural and proximate (n=43)			Rural and isolated (n=17)		
	Mean/%	(Min/Max)		Mean/%	(Min/Max)		Mean/%	(Min/Max)	
Demographic background & pre-migration work experience and educational attainment									
% male	83%	--	--	100%	--	--	100%	--	--
Mean age at most recent interview	45	(26	83)	46	(22	88)	46	(28	71)
<i>Marital status at most recent interview</i>									
% Single (Never married)	6%	--	--	10%	--	--	0%	--	--
% Married	84%	--	--	83%	--	--	100%	--	--
% Divorced/widowed	10%	--	--	7%	--	--	0%	--	--
% Had children at most recent interview	86%	--	--	71%	--	--	88%	--	--
% Completed secondary school (9-years of schooling)	46%	--	--	46%	--	--	25%	--	--
% in labor force prior to migration	99%	--	--	100%	--	--	100%	--	--
Timing and reasons of departure, US work history, and migration experience									
Mean age at first migration	25	(2	54)	24	(8	62)	26	(15	44)
% in US labor force	100%	--	--	100%	--	--	100%	--	--
% Migrated multiple times	47%	--	--	83%	--	--	94%	--	--
% Documented on most recent trip	5%	--	--	24%	--	--	65%	--	--
<i>Reason for most recent trip^a</i>									
% Economy need/lack of opportunity	70%	--	--	82%	--	--	100%	--	--
% Learn/improve	29%	--	--	3%	--	--	0%	--	--
% To invest in a business	4%	--	--	2%	--	--	0%	--	--
% Other ^b	13%	--	--	15%	--	--	13%	--	--
Timing and reasons of return									
Mean age at most recent return (years)	33	(15	66)	38	(17	73)	40	(18	56)
<i>Reason for most recent return^a</i>									
% Family reunification	56%	--	--	51%	--	--	41%	--	--
% Expiration of a temporary guest worker visa	2%	--	--	15%	--	--	59%	--	--
% deported	15%	--	--	17%	--	--	0%	--	--
% Other reasons ^c	42%	--	--	30%	--	--	36%	--	--

^a Responses do not sum to 100 because respondents could cite multiple reasons.

^b Other included personal invitation, health, divorce, education, religion, and tourism

^c Other reasons for return included: boredom, loneliness, fear of deportation and racism, difficulty finding work, a medical operation, higher education, personal problems, health, completed migration goal, and to start a business.

Table 3 Labor market status, industrial profile, and resource mobilization upon return

	Urban	Rural and proximate	Rural and isolated
Primary labor market status upon return			
% Peasant farmer	2%	5%	35%
% Non-agricultural worker, informal	22%	33%	18%
% Non-agricultural self-employed without employees	17%	9%	0%
% Non-agricultural worker, formal	28%	23%	0%
% Non-agricultural employer	19%	16%	0%
% Not economically active	12%	14%	47%
Industrial profile of economically active respondents upon return			
Agriculture	2%	11%	67%
Commerce	18%	0%	0%
Construction	15%	29%	33%
Manufacturing	36%	29%	0%
Services	29%	32%	0%
Resource mobilization upon return			
% Remitted money for investment ^a	21%	72%	47%
% Applied skills learned in the US to work in Mexico	54%	21%	6%

^a Almost all of our respondents remitted money to support household consumption. Thus, we highlight those who remitted money to support particular investments. The proportions here include personal investments (most often houses) and labor market investments (most often businesses and occasionally higher education).