

**RETURN MIGRATION AROUND THE WORLD: AN INTEGRATED AGENDA FOR
FUTURE RESEARCH**

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ABSTRACT

Currently, two distinct bodies of scholarship address the increased volume and diversity of global return migration since the mid-1990s. The economic sociology of return, which assumes that return is voluntary, investigates how time living and working abroad affects returnees' labor market opportunities and the resulting implications for economic development. A second scholarship, the political sociology of return, recognizing the increasing role of both emigration and immigration states in controlling and managing migration, examines how state and institutional actors in countries of origin shape the reintegration experiences of deportees, rejected asylum seekers, and non-admitted migrants forced home. We review these literatures independently, examining their research questions, methodologies, and findings, while also noting limitations and areas where additional research is needed. We then engage these literatures to provide an integrated path forward for researching and theorizing return migration—a synergized resource mobilization framework.

KEYWORDS: Return Migration; Resource Mobilization; Political Sociology of Migration; Economic Sociology of Migration; Human Capital; Deportation; Institutional contexts of reception and reintegration; forced and voluntary return migration; Economic Development.

INTRODUCTION

By 2017, the number of international migrants had reached 258 million, representing 3.4 percent of the world's population (United Nations 2017). Estimates suggest that anywhere from 15 to 50 percent of these migrants will return to their country of birth, usually within five years of their departure (Wahba 2015). From a theoretical perspective, scholars have long recognized that international mobility occurs within historical migration systems that connect nations and regions (Fawcett 1989; Kritz et al. 1992; Mabogunje 1970; Morawska et al. 1991). Not surprisingly, some of the largest of these systems also see the largest return migration flows.¹ Despite the substantial number of returning migrants, however, data challenges and limited theoretical innovation have long stymied attention to the topic (Battistella 2018). Now, with recognition of the increasing volume and diversity of return migration since the 1990s, we are experiencing a boom in the scholarship on return and the reintegration experience.

Two broad categories of scholarship capture the growth and diversity in contemporary return migration. In one literature, which we term the economic sociology of return, scholars draw on economic models of migration to assess the ways in which return migrants mobilize resources they acquire abroad, such as human and financial capital, to achieve economic mobility upon return. Undergirding these studies is the assumption that international movement is a free and voluntary response to binational wage inequalities, economic shocks, household labor market strategies, and personal preferences (Stark & Bloom 1985; Todaro 1969).

Yet, as Jean-Pierre Cassarino (2004) reminds us, in a world in which deportees and rejected asylum seekers constitute a growing proportion of migrants, scholars must pay attention

¹ Azose and Raftery (2019) estimated the four largest 2010-2015 return flows: U.S.-Mexico (1,309,000), UAE-India (380,000), Ukraine-Russia (358,000), and India-Bangladesh (350,000)

to how changing political contexts of departure and return influence the reintegration experiences of returnees. Recognizing the increasing role of both emigration and immigration states in controlling and managing migration (de Haas et al. 2019; Hollifield et al. 2014; Waldinger 2015), a second rapidly expanding scholarship, which we term the political sociology of return, focuses on the interpretive return experiences of deportees, rejected asylum seekers, and other non-admitted migrants forced home by states of arrival and settlement. In stark contrast to its economically oriented counterparts, this scholarship views emigration states and their legal systems and institutions as key actors in the process of return migration and reintegration.

In this article, we first review these two literatures independently, examining their central research questions, methodologies, and findings, while also noting limitations and areas where additional research is needed. In our conclusion, we revisit theoretical and methodological approaches to return migration and their implications for individual labor market mobility and economic development. By engaging these two growing but largely distinct bodies of literature, we hope to provide a theoretical and empirical path forward for scholars researching and theorizing return migration.

THE ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY OF RETURN

Workers account for 59 percent of all international migrants, and most of these laborers travel abroad with the goal of one day returning home (Dustmann & Weiss 2007; International Labor Organization 2017; Stark & Bloom 1985). In this section, we review a growing set of studies that examine labor market outcomes among return migrants with the central aim of understanding how time spent living and working abroad affects individuals' labor market mobility upon return

and how return migration more broadly might contribute to economic development in sending countries.

To identify the economic effects of international migration, much of the economic sociology of return builds on the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM), a framework developed to predict labor migration from developing to developed areas (Massey et al. 1993; Stark 1991). The NELM conceives of migration as a strategy that less educated workers in constrained labor markets deploy to mitigate market uncertainty and accumulate resources in pursuit of economic mobility (Stark & Bloom 1985). Building on the idea that migration constitutes a long-term mobility strategy, scholars use econometric methods to test whether migration has a causal effect on returnees' labor market outcomes—i.e., earnings and entry into self-employment—and, by extension, whether return migration stimulates economic development in sending regions. However, because these studies estimate migrations' average economic effects, the social processes of resource accumulation and mobilization assumed in their models remain largely unexplored and untested.

A second expanding body of research seeks to fill this gap. Drawing on field studies and in-depth interviews with migrants and return migrants of various socio-economic backgrounds, scholars examine the intentional but also unexpected ways in which migrants accumulate resources, particularly human capital, while they are abroad, along with patterns of resource mobilization upon return. Recognizing that migration is a complex social process, these scholars move beyond established economic models, developing new concepts to explain heterogeneous patterns of resource accumulation and their uneven consequences for labor market reintegration and mobility upon return. We draw on these two scholarships to address the following questions:

- 1) Does international migration experience improve returnees' labor market opportunities and

thus boost economic development? 2) How do migrants acquire resources while working abroad and how do those resources affect their economic mobility upon return?

Does Migration “Cause” Labor Market Mobility and Economic Development?

Assigning a causal effect to international migration experience is challenging because migration is a selective process and many return migrants are naturally risk-taking and entrepreneurial individuals who likely would have started businesses or achieved higher earnings whether or not they migrated. Indeed, if migration fits within long-term labor market strategies, then migration experience itself may actually be endogenous to labor market outcomes observed upon return (Dustmann 2001)—i.e., migrants’ economic goals would determine how long they worked abroad and the volume of savings brought home (Dustmann & Kirchkamp 2002). To isolate the causal effect of migration experience on economic outcomes among labor migrants with little schooling, scholars generally rely on instrumental variables or similar identification strategies to mitigate concern that migrants’ unobserved characteristics bias study results.² In this section, we review findings from econometric studies that statistically identify migration as an exogenous causal variable.

At the individual level, these studies examine two primary labor market outcomes among returnees: self-employment and wages. In developing countries, self-employment (variously termed entrepreneurship, business formation, or occupational choice) is often the most viable pathway to economic mobility available to workers without a high school degree (Gindling & Newhouse 2014; Perry et al. 2007). Business formation also aligns with the NELM’s prediction

² For an assessment of common instrumental variables used in econometric research on return migration, see McKenzie, Stillman, and Gibson (2010).

that working abroad facilitates financial capital accumulation and thus enables return migrants to overcome credit market constraints in their home economies (Lindstrom & Lauster 2001; Massey et al. 1993; Massey & Parrado 1998; Stark 1991). Wages provide a more general indicator of economic mobility that could reflect more than the financial capital investment model proposed by the NELM; higher earnings could also signify the accumulation of new human capital skills, which might enable returnees of all schooling levels to secure higher paying jobs relative to their non-migrant counterparts.

Econometric studies using instrumental variables consistently identify a positive effect of international migration on the odds of being self-employed among return migrants. This result has been found among return migrants in five central and eastern European countries (Martin & Radu 2012),³ in Egypt (Wahba & Zenou 2012), in Tunisia (Mesnard 2004), and in rural China (Démurger & Xu 2011).⁴ In the case of Egypt, international migration experience was found to increase the likelihood of business survival among migrants returning from nearby Arab states (Marchetta 2012). In their study of occupational choice among Albanian non-migrants and return migrants, Piracha and Vadean (2010) distinguished between self-employment with and without employees, a methodological approach to differentiate survivalist and prosperous self-employment (Gindling & Newhouse 2014). They found a much larger effect of international migration experience on entry into self-employment with employees, suggesting that international migration encourages prosperous business formation and can boost local development through job creation and innovation.

³ The Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania

⁴ Non-econometric studies also report a positive association between international migration experience and self-employment in Mexico (Lindstrom 2013; Parrado & Gutierrez 2016; Sheehan & Riosmena 2013).

Several migration scholars have probed more deeply, investigating the causal mechanisms through which migration might enable business formation. After adjusting for unobserved confounders, studies document a positive association between accumulated savings and entry into self-employment in Tunisia (Mesnard 2004) and China (Démurger & Xu 2011). Accumulated migration experience—i.e., total months or years spent abroad—can also facilitate business formation, as Hamdouch and Wahba (2015) found in their study of Moroccan migrants returning from European and Arab countries. These studies provide support for the NELM’s proposition that international migration enables migrants to establish their own businesses through the acquisition and transfer of financial resources they accumulate over time (Massey & Parrado 1998).

Econometric studies also find that migration can lead to higher wages upon return. Hypothesizing that migrants accumulate and transfer valuable human capital skills, scholars document a wage premium associated with any prior migration experience that ranges from 30 percent in Central and Eastern Europe (Martin & Radu 2012), to 7 percent in Ireland (Barrett & Goggin 2010), to 16 percent in Egypt (Wahba 2015). However, these studies simply compare wages between returnees and non-migrants, without actually observing or measuring skill formation. To improve on these binary comparisons, Reinhold and Thom (2013) drew on the concept of occupational channeling developed by Sanderson and Painter (2011) to infer skill transfers among Mexican migrants to the United States. Occupational channeling occurs when workers change jobs within the same occupation or industry, transitions that facilitate skill development and transfer. Distinguishing between general U.S. work experience and occupation-specific work experience (i.e., U.S.-experience in the same occupation that migrants entered upon return), Reinhold and Thom (2013) found that each additional year of general work

experience was associated with just two percent higher wages in Mexico, but each year of occupation-specific work experience was associated with nine percent higher wages.⁵ Their distinction between general and occupation-specific experience provides strong evidence that the earnings premium for migration results in large part from work-related skills learned on- the-job while abroad.

Building on these micro-level investigations of migration and labor market mobility, several recent econometric studies assess the impact of return migration on community-level economic development. Hausman and Nedelkoska (2018) showed that mass return migration to Albania in the wake of Greece's recent economic recession was associated with higher wages and better employment opportunities among non-migrants with little schooling, i.e., those non-migrants most likely to work in the small businesses started by returnees. Waddell and Fontenla (2015) and Conover and colleagues (2018) found that municipal level return migration to Mexico was associated with increases in wages, employment, business formation, and other indicators of human development. Arguing that these economic improvements could reduce deprivation and improve social cohesion, Bucheli and colleagues (2019) found that return migration was also associated with lower homicide rates in Mexican municipalities.

Taken together, these micro- and meso-level studies provide evidence that migration can enable individual economic mobility and that return migration is an important mechanism through which international mobility contributes to social and economic development in sending communities, conclusions consistent with the NELM. At the same time, the focus on causality encourages econometric scholars to use easily-instrumented dichotomous and linear indicators of

⁵ Reinhold and Thom adjusted for migrants' highest U.S. earnings, which they argue proxy for unobserved skills, i.e., migrants' ability to achieve occupational and wage mobility in the United States.

the migration experience. These measures assume that migration is a homogeneous process in which all migrants accumulate the same resources at the same speed while abroad and mobilize them in the same way upon return. These simplifying assumptions stem largely from theoretical reliance on economic models developed to predict when people migrate (Massey et al. 1999; Stark 1991), but not to explain what migrants do while they are abroad or upon return. To unpack return migrants' potentially heterogeneous economic experiences and the largely unobserved role that human capital transfers may play in the process, we turn to the scholarship on resource accumulation and mobilization among international migrants.

Patterns of Human Capital Formation and Resource Mobilization

Whereas financial capital accumulation (savings) can be measured using simple linear indicators, the assessment of human capital formation (skills learning) and transfer, is more complex. Skill formation among international migrants has been studied in various regions of the globe and among a diverse group of return migrants that varies by age, education, gender, and socioeconomic status. These studies aim to measure migrants' "total human capital," which includes formal schooling, but also informal learning in social and vocational settings (Findlay et al. 1996; Hagan et al. 2015; Williams 2007), which could enhance their capabilities to achieve economic mobility upon return (de Haas 2014).⁶ Below, we review and assess studies that investigate the social processes through which migrants acquire and transfer human capital across the migratory circuit, and how new skills, along with accumulated savings, affect their labor market opportunities upon return.

⁶ For a broader theoretical understanding of the human capabilities approach, see Amartya Sen (1988, 1999).

Studies conducted in El Salvador, India, Mexico, Morocco, Poland, and Slovakia find that migrants with varying levels of schooling acquire social, technical, and language skills while working abroad. Some migrants learn new skills through formal job training and vocational programs, but many also gain these skills informally on the job through interaction with coworkers, close observation, practice, informal mentoring, and trial and error (Grabowska 2018; Hagan et al. 2015; Kumar et al. 2014; Lowe et al. 2010; Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009; Romero 2012; Williams & Baláž 2005). To recognize the value of human capital acquired abroad, Williams and Baláž (2005, p. 442) developed the concept of brain circulation, which refers to “human capital enhancement via (temporary) mobility which, implicitly, is used more effectively upon return.” Hagan and colleagues (2015) conceptualize the acquisition of these skills as “lifelong human capital formation” to capture both formal and informal learning across the life course.

Modes of skill mobilization and transfer among international migrants vary by level of education. Some professionals who travel abroad form valuable transnational social ties and add prestigious international appointments to their resumes. Upon return, these highly-educated migrants can leverage their new human capital resources, along with technical skills learned abroad, to achieve intra-company occupational mobility, gain new responsibilities, and earn higher wages (Kumar et al. 2014; Williams & Baláž 2005). In contrast, migrants with little schooling often change industries or launch new businesses in order to maximize the value of their skills. These labor market shifts reflect the constrained occupational mobility structures that most less educated migrants encounter upon return (Gindling and Newhouse 2014; Wassink and Hagan 2018).

Evidence from Mexico suggests that patterns of skill mobilization among less educated migrants are also gendered. Many Mexican immigrant women work in domestic and customer service settings in the United States (Hagan 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Pessar 1999), which provide opportunities to acquire social and linguistic skills. Upon return, young women often mobilize those skills to secure salaried jobs in tourism, customer service, or working in call centers—industries that reward and often require English competence and customer service experience (Caldwell 2019; Dingeman 2018; Hagan et al. 2015; Rothstein 2015). However, employer preferences for young attractive service workers limit employment opportunities among many of their older counterparts, despite comparable language competence (Hagan et al. 2015).

In contrast, Mexican immigrant men, tend to work alongside co-ethnics in construction, landscaping, and manufacturing—industries that do not require English, but often facilitate the acquisition of new technical skills, including working with advanced technology (Lowe et al. 2010; Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009; Sanderson & Painter 2011). Some of these male migrants opt to invest their skills in small businesses, rather than pursuing occupational mobility, because they expect to more easily apply new technologies to entrepreneurship than to alter existing work processes under the supervision of an employer or manager (Hagan & Wassink 2016). Evidence that not only well-educated migrants, but also those with little schooling acquire new skills abroad, which they can mobilize in their sending countries, provides an important counter to the oft-cited “brain drain” narrative, which views international migration as a net human capital loss for less developed countries (Thomas 2008; Williams & Baláz 2014).

Several scholars have even suggested that new skills are actually more important for return migrants’ economic mobility than remitted savings, a suggestion that starkly contradicts

the assumptions underlying most econometric research on return migration. For example, Williams and Baláz (2005) found that although a few of their highly educated Slovakian return migrants invested remitted savings in business formation, most viewed their human capital acquired working in the United Kingdom as far more important for their long-term economic mobility. Likewise, a survey of highly skilled Indian migrants returning from Europe found that knowledge, skills, and hands-on experience were the most important resources gained abroad, while only a few of the returnees felt that financial capital acquired overseas enabled economic mobility upon return (CODEV-EPFL et al. 2013). Similarly, in their longitudinal study of self-employed return migrants in urban Mexico, Joshua Wassink and Jacqueline Hagan (2018) concluded that although accumulated savings and remittances facilitated the initiation of new business ventures, new technical, organizational, and language skills acquired in their U.S. jobs enabled returnees to improve upon existing practices or identify new opportunities, thus providing a competitive edge in saturated urban labor markets.

The importance of human capital formation among international migrants highlights the limitations of the NELM as a framework for investigating economic outcomes among returnees. The NELM conceives of migration as a well-planned economic strategy with predictable and easily measurable outcomes. This conceptualization leads to the simplified measurements of migration experience found throughout econometric studies, which generally assume that post-migration outcomes are attributable to pre-migration goals. Yet, the qualitative literature on human capital formation demonstrates that many migrants who travel abroad in search of better wages, new economic opportunities, or even adventures and new experiences accumulate unexpected human capital skills that can create opportunities for occupational mobility or entrepreneurship upon return (Grabowska & Jastrzebowska 2019; Janta et al. Forthcoming;

Kumar 2018; Rothstein 2015). This evidence of human capital formation abroad suggests the need to conceptualize international migrants as highly motivated and dynamic actors who adjust their economic strategies as they acquire new resources and discover potential labor market opportunities abroad and at home. Econometric research on return migration could better recognize that conceptualization through the adoption of concepts such as brain circulation and lifelong human capital formation.

Despite evidence of the positive returns from skill development, however, human capital formation does not guarantee economic mobility. The literature identifies five factors that affect the contributions of international skills learning to labor market reintegration and economic mobility upon return. First, opportunities to learn skills depend on labor markets and occupational structures in destination countries, which together affect their access to steady work and skill-learning opportunities while abroad (Griffith 1993; Hagan et al. 2015; Light 2006; Munshi 2003; Zlotniski 1994). Second, opportunities to learn skills are shaped by migrants' own characteristics, such as life cycle stage, gender, socioeconomic status, work experience, legal status, and formal educational attainment (Caldwell 2019; Dingeman 2018; Duleep & Regets 1999; Grabowska & Jastrzebowska 2019; Hall et al. 2019; Kumar et al. 2014; Williams & Baláž 2005, 2014). Third, some skills are place specific and cannot be transferred (Duleep & Regets 2002; Thomas & Inkpen 2013). For example, Hagan and colleagues (2015), identified some techniques used in roofing and certain parts of agriculture that differed between Mexico and the United States and therefore could not easily be applied to work upon return. Fourth, the value of new skills depends on work and wage structures in origin countries. For example, the hierarchy of subcontracting and low minimum wages in countries like India and Mexico limit the recognition of new skills that return migrants acquire in Gulf countries and the United States

(Kumar 2018; Wassink & Hagan 2018). When migrants return without new human capital or to communities and employers that do not recognize and reward the skills learned abroad, they often experience downward occupational mobility or are driven into self-employment as a last resort (Cobo et al. 2010; Lindstrom 2013; Mezger et al 2012). Fifth, some of the skills that migrants learn abroad can also be obtained at home, and thus render remitted human capital redundant rather than novel or innovative. Shinu Singh (2003) found that IT professionals who worked in the United States often accumulated and transferred the same technical skills learned by IT workers who remained in India, which provided little to no boost in terms of their occupational mobility or wages upon return.

This fifth point about the potential redundancy of skills learning abroad sheds light on a larger shortcoming of the literature on human capital formation and resource mobilization among migrants. Because most studies of international human capital formation and transfer only measure skills acquisition among migrants, they provide no evidence that opportunities to learn skills abroad are superior to or better rewarded than similar domestic opportunities. For example, in her study of Polish migrants returning from Western and Northern Europe, Grabowska (2018, p. 881) concluded that “by changing the context of one’s life, migration provides a context to form, validate and develop social skills both explicitly and implicitly.” Yet, non-migrants may gain similar skills through changes in their domestic life contexts, such as job relocation or change or educational attainment (Balán et al. 1973; Duleep and Regets 2002). Even studies that compare return migrants to non-migrants often impose reductive assumptions on non-migrants by categorizing returnees according to their accumulated resources, but treating all non-migrants as a single homogenous reference group (e.g., Hagan and Wassink 2016; Mezger et al. 2012).

This approach, which implicitly valorizes work in developed western countries, neglects individual and contextual heterogeneity inherent to sending countries around the world.

Future Research

Below we offer three suggestions that can guide future research to deepen our understanding of the economic sociology of return:

- Wage and employment structures. Emigration and return respond to macroeconomic structures (Massey et al. 1999). These structures—i.e., minimum wage laws, labor market informality, industrial profiles, employer preference, prevalence of self-employment—should be incorporated into research to better contextualize labor market reintegration and economic mobility among returnees.
- Local context. Scholars should also explore how the local contexts of sending communities inform migrants' resource accumulation strategies while abroad and shape their labor market trajectories upon return. Despite the relevance of community-level social, economic, and geographic features to theoretical understandings of return (Cerase 1974), local context is largely absent from the economic sociology of return.
- Migrants as reflexive actors. Individuals who migrate with well thought-out goals in mind sometimes adjust those targets as they acquire new resources, particularly human capital, which can direct international migrants toward new and unexpected labor market strategies across the migratory circuit. Dynamic modeling techniques that recognize the fluidity of individual and household strategies will deepen econometric research on return migration.

THE POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF RETURN

Since the mid-1990s, the governments of liberal democracies have been restricting access to permanent residency for migrants in favor of promoting temporary and return migration (Cook-Martín 2019; Piché 2013). This policy shift has created new categories of unwanted non-citizens with limited rights and protections (Anderson et al. 2011; Piché 2013). Fueled by the politics of nativism, xenophobia, and national security, this protectionist paradigm normalizes detention and deportation as the primary tools of migration deterrence and control (Gibney 2013) and creates new and significant return flows that expose forced returnees to places and people from whom many grew socially distant as they transitioned from emigrants to immigrants and settled abroad, forming new households and often new families (Waldinger 2015).

The scholarship that we refer to as the political sociology of return recognizes that we have reached a turning point in the contemporary age of migration control and deportation (Gibney 2008; Wong 2015). This scholarship seeks to understand the effects of mounting immigration control policies by examining the return experiences of those migrant groups who are forced by states to leave a country of arrival or residence, including non-admitted migrants, deportees, and rejected asylum seekers.⁷ In this section, we review largely qualitative and interpretive studies and analyses of human rights reports undertaken in various countries and regions of the world that focus on the ways in which states and institutional actors structure the reception of forcibly returned nationals and how these politicized migrants' are affected by,

⁷ The distinctions between different types of return migrants who are subject to deportation are not always clear because officials in emigration states do not always record them. Non-admitted migrants are those who were denied entry into a state based on admissibility, while failed asylum seekers are those who sought protection but were denied asylum in the country of arrival. Deportees are individuals who have been formally removed from a country of arrival (Blondel et al. 2015).

interpret, and resist their returns. Our review addresses the following questions: 1) What are the types of policies that emigration states have developed to receive those exiled home, and how do those policies affect the reception and reintegration experiences of deported migrants? 2) What are the subjective reintegration experiences, interpretations, and agentic responses of the different migrant groups subject to deportation orders?

State Contexts of Reception and Reintegration

Scholars find that although state-reception policies shape the vulnerabilities and reintegration experiences of nationals expelled home, governments operate along a dynamic continuum from criminalizing to ignoring to welcoming. Where states fall on this continuum of reception depends on multiple related factors, including their political systems, their national emigration/immigration laws, economic conditions, the stability and professionalization of their enforcement institutions, and their support of and partnerships with civil society organizations serving returnees. In some countries, especially those with authoritarian regimes, existing laws restrict the rights of nationals to emigrate without authorization. Algeria, Cameroon, Cuba, Iran, Morocco, North Korea, Pakistan and Tunisia have crafted laws that criminalize emigration and prosecute through fines and imprisonment returned nationals who departed the country without travel documents or with fraudulent ones (Blondel et al. 2015).

Other countries such as those with unstable economies, corrupt military and enforcement institutions, and/or weak social safety nets do not have laws that criminalize emigration, but still imprison, detain, extort and stigmatize returnees who are expelled from the EU and the United States. Among these countries are Somalia, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Albania, Egypt, Jamaica, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (Alpes 2019; Blondel et

al. 2015; Coutin 2016; Dingeman 2018; Golash-Boza 2015; Hagan et al. 2008; Headley & Milovanovic 2016a; Maginot 2019; Peutz 2010). In Albania, police regularly destroy the identity documents of all returnees from Europe (Blondel et al. 2015), while officials in the Dominican Republic treat persons deported from the United States as criminals, booking and detaining them upon arrival (Golash-Boza 2015; Martin 2017). Forced returnees who traveled abroad with fraudulent documents, were deported on criminal grounds, or joined gangs, are prime targets for harassment and extortion upon arrival (Blondel et al. 2015; Zilberg 2004, 2011). Relatives of migrants can also get caught in the extortion dragnet and suffer from the forced return of a family member. Cambodia regularly places deportees in detention until released to family members (York 2013). Presuming that households have accumulated wealth through the migration of a family member, officials in Haiti and Egypt regularly extort money from the families of returnees before they are released (Blondel et al. 2015).

The vulnerabilities that these returnees face upon return can extend beyond their arrival, often restricting long-term reintegration opportunities and encouraging remigration. Some governments and employers design specific programs to regulate and surveil the mobility of forced returnees, especially return migrants with criminal records (Blondel et al. 2015; Golash-Boza 2015). The government of the Dominican Republic, for example, singles out deportees who have been returned on criminal grounds and requires them to report on a monthly basis for a six-month period, after which they are issued a *Carta de Buena Conducta* which they must present to potential employers (Golash-Boza 2015). In the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Guatemala, police and gangs target and harass these forced returnees who are easily recognizable by their dress, tattoos, and speech. (Farina et al. 2010; Golash-Boza 2015; Maginot 2019; Martin 2017; Zilberg 2004). In these unwelcoming environments it is not surprising that many deportees

desire to re-migrate abroad where they have strong family and economic connections and feel they belong (Alpes 2019; Berger Cardoso et al. 2016; Brotherton & Barrios 2011; Caldwell 2019; Coutin 2010; David 2017; Galvin 2015; Hagan et al. 2008; Martínez et al. 2018; Schuster & Majidi 2015).

In sharp contrast, countries with long histories of circular migration, like Mexico and the Philippines, or those with strong economies, like Brazil and India, often establish neutral or favorable policies and practices towards repatriated migrants that are intended to foster a sense of belonging. Most of these programs however leave the responsibility for reintegration to the migrants themselves, their families, labor market actors, and NGOs. Brazil, for example, attaches little or no stigma to deportation, but has no official policy for receiving and reintegrating deportees. Though many repatriated Brazilians face initial financial setbacks upon return, Golash-Boza (2015) argues that the government's relatively favorable reception of deportees enables many deported Brazilians to reintegrate smoothly over time. With its long history of circular irregular migration and engagement with its diaspora abroad and upon return, we shouldn't be surprised that Mexico maintains a neutral policy toward those repatriated home and attaches little or no stigma to deportation. This neutrality enables some deportees in Mexico, especially those with felony convictions in the United States, to "start over without past mistakes hanging over them" (Caldwell 2019, p. 278).

Regardless of their orientations toward deportees, most states experiencing substantial forced return migration flows lack the institutional capacities to reintegrate these vulnerable populations (Cassarino 2004). Thus, states like Mexico, El Salvador, Cambodia, and Honduras increasingly rely on binational agreements, collaboration with international organizations, interfaith coalitions, local educational institutions and civil society organizations, and in some

cases support from the countries of deportation to fill the gaps (Cassarino 2004; Headley & Milovanovic 2016b; Ruiz Soto et al. 2019). Educational institutions and civil society organizations assist with reintegration of vulnerable groups, including unemployed persons, the elderly or disabled, and youth who were raised abroad and have little cultural familiarity with countries of birth (Boehm 2016; Hernández-León et al. 2020; York 2013; Zúñiga & Giorguli Saucedo 2019).

In El Salvador, Cambodia, Guatemala, and especially in Mexico, deportees lead and staff some of these emerging civil society organizations, rendering them potentially important research sites for examining skill transfers, agency, resistance and collective action in the reintegration process (Headley & Milovanovic 2016b; Maginot 2019). In Mexico, for example, a female deportee with a history of union organizing in the United States is the director of an organization that serves deportees in several Mexican cities.⁸ Despite their dynamic leadership teams, these often small and underfunded NGOs cannot overcome structural limitations such as limited development and low-paying jobs, in countries of return such as Samoa and Tonga (Pereira 2011), the Maghreb countries (David 2017), Cambodia (York 2013), El Salvador (Dingeman 2018), and Somaliland (Peutz 2010). Access to vital services and employment, while important, does not restore deportees' foreign earning power or reunite them with family members still living abroad.

The Return Experience

Reintegration is a complex and often jarring experience for migrants forced to return, especially those who return as strangers to their birth family's homelands after years spent abroad.

⁸ Interview with authors' Return Migration Project research team, December 2018.

Although deportation regimes historically targeted men, removal orders increasingly strike indiscriminately with the intent to send a message of deterrence and control (De Genova & Peutz 2010; Gibney 2013; Kanstroom 2012). Women, the elderly, the ill and frail, and children and families are increasingly caught up in the deportation dragnet. Collectively, post-deportation studies highlight three recurring themes that characterize involuntary returnees' experiences: stigma; economic integration; and shifting family configurations. However, these studies, which generally limit their focus to one group of returnees in a particular country, can obscure substantial heterogeneity in the post-deportation experience. While most migrants expelled home are emotionally and economically unprepared for their returns, the consequences of deportation vary not only by state, local, and family contexts of reception but also by migrants' own life course stages, genders, and migration experiences.

The discrete elements of stigmatization (labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss) have profound implications for the life chances of many groups (Goffman 1963; Link & Phelan 2001), including deportees. Like other migrant groups (e.g., undocumented migrants who are labeled as aliens or criminals) deportees find themselves subject to labeling and disapproval by states, families, communities, and employers. Stigmatization of deportees varies by social context. Family and community members often stigmatize rejected asylum seekers, non-admitted migrants, and deportees from Europe as failures because they had hopes and expectations that the migration of a family member would bring economic prosperity through remittances, launching a business, or sponsoring other migrants (Cassarino 2004; Kleist 2016; Martin 2017; Schuster & Majidi 2015; Stark & Bloom 1985).

In contrast, deportees exiled home from the United States are more likely to be labeled as criminals (Drotbohm 2014; Golash-Boza 2015, p.; Hagan et al. 2008). By labeling deportees as

failures, criminals, unlucky, stupid, or lazy, others can retain the image of a successful migration project (Alpes 2019; Golash-Boza 2015; Kleist 2016; Schuster & Majidi 2015). The experience of post-deportation stigma is also gendered. While men express their deportations in terms of personal failures, women additionally interpret their forced removals through their economic and social obligations to care for family and kin both abroad and in homeland (Ratia 2011). These experiences upon arrival in their official homelands lead to a chaotic litany of confusion, depression, alienation, shame, loss, and anxiety (Boehm 2016).

Stigmas are also influenced by migration geographies and temporalities. Studies find that stigmas are attached most frequently to those who have been deported from distant countries. In their comparative study of Afghanis deported from the UK and from neighboring Iran and Pakistan, Schuster and Majidi (2015) found that deportees from Europe are labeled failures in order to punish those who did not fulfill family expectations, while clinging to the possibility of a better life abroad. In contrast, for Afghani migrants in neighboring Iran or Pakistan who live under a constant threat of deportation, removal has become an accepted “occupational hazard” (2015, p. 646). The normalcy of deportation was also reported in a study of undocumented Zimbabwean migrant workers in Botswana (Galvin 2015) and in the repeated crossings and returns of undocumented Mexican workers during an earlier period of lax U.S. border control along the U.S.’s southern border (Singer & Massey 1998). Thus, while deportation is often traumatic, it can become routine, and types of stigma are shaped by political, historical, and social contexts (Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2015, p. 557).

Another central research topic in the post-deportation scholarship concerns the economic reintegration and mobility pathways of deportees. Many studies addressing this question paint a picture of marginalization and economic struggle. Accounts in Cambodia, Somalia, the

Dominican Republic, and Mexico have found that deportees are often unemployed or work sporadically at the lower rungs of the informal economy (Anderson 2015; Brotherton & Barrios 2011; Dingeman 2018; Golash-Boza 2015; York 2013). Many deported youth raised abroad turn to jobs in tourism or international call centers where their pay is generally higher than in other sectors of the economy and they can use their English language skills while building new social networks alongside other exiles, which sometimes provide access to better employment opportunities (Anderson 2015; Golash-Boza 2015; Maginot 2019; Olvera & Muela 2016). These post-deportation studies, which primarily rely on cross-sectional interviews with recently deported migrants, offer limited insights into the long-term trajectories of forced returnees. Moreover, most of these studies have been conducted in communities or countries with unfavorable receptions, weak economies, and inadequate social safety nets—structural conditions that could stymie successful reintegration for any migrant. Thus, it is difficult to examine the importance of absence from homeland, human agency, and resource mobilization in forced returnees’ economic reintegration.

Recently, some scholars have undertaken longitudinal and comparative empirical studies in an attempt to theorize how these multiple factors influence the labor market reintegration of forced returnees. The findings from these studies, while varied, are more optimistic than their earlier counterparts and highlight the adaptability and resiliency of deportees. Some scholars, for example, have drawn on insights from the political sociology of migration to understand how absence from homeland and a growing dissimilarity between emigrants and those left behind influences the return experience, while others adapt concepts from theories of immigrant incorporation to studying the reintegration experience of deportees and their children (FitzGerald 2013; Hernández-León et al. 2020).

Dingeman (2018) has examined the reintegration experiences of two groups of Salvadoran deportees: those who were raised in El Salvador and kept in close contact with their homeland while abroad, and those who grew up abroad and are largely unfamiliar with El Salvador and its society. She found that those who were raised abroad were far more likely to be stigmatized as different, to be targeted by officials because of their tattoos, and to struggle economically. In their study of the forced, preemptive, and voluntary return of families and their children to Mexico, Hernández-León, Zúñiga, and Lakhani (2020) also found that older children who were born in Mexico but raised in the United States and later deported to Mexico struggled economically and socially as “strangers in their own land,” while their younger counterparts who returned home as part of a family reunification strategy could more easily integrate through schools and family support systems. Both Dingeman and Hernández-León and colleagues argue that these divergent pathways reflect a segmented re/integration experience, drawing on the concept developed to understand the incorporation of different immigrant groups (Portes & Zhou 1993).

Another line of scholarship builds on the theoretical work of Cassarino (2004), who argues that the growing heterogeneity of return migration flows necessitates consideration of a wide range of “resource mobilization patterns” to explain why some return migrants fare better than others. Resource mobilization patterns reflect the level of preparedness for return, the accumulation of tangible (e.g., financial capital) and intangible resources (e.g., skills, contacts) acquired across the migratory circuit, along with how migrants respond and adapt to institutional,

political, and economic conditions at home—all of which have a bearing on their labor market reintegration processes (Cassarino 2004).⁹

Building on Cassarino's argument that preparedness affects return migrants' labor market pathways, David (2017) tested whether a disruption in migrants' resource accumulation processes—deportation—affects their economic reintegration upon return. Using data from the Migration de Retour Maghreb (MIREM) project, David compared the structural integration of forced and voluntary returnees in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. He found that deportees suffer greater unemployment and are less likely than voluntary returnees to invest in new businesses. Recent returnees, in particular, endured the highest unemployment rate, suggesting the need to adjust to local labor market conditions over time.

Longitudinal studies of Mexican deportees highlight the importance of using a temporal perspective to examine the mobilization of resources acquired abroad among different types of return migrants. Drawing on interviews with deported and voluntary migrants in Leon, Mexico, Hagan and colleagues (2019) documented convergence in labor market trajectories and social mobility outcomes of these two groups. They found that while deportation can relegate migrants to undesirable jobs while they re-familiarize themselves with local economies, over time many adapted through the mobilization of English language, social, and technical skills acquired in the United States. Caldwell (2019) and Silver (2019) observed similar patterns of English language transfers and mobilization in their longitudinal studies of deportees working in Mexico City. In their study of men deported from Texas prisons to Mexico, Jose Juan Olvera and Carolina Muela (2016) found that over time these returnees transferred tattooing and barber skills learned or

⁹ Some of Cassarino's insights on the importance of preparedness for return and local conditions in communities of origin draw on earlier structuralist analyses of voluntary returns (Cerase 1974; Gmelch 1980; King 1986).

improved in prison to launch small enterprises in an established flea market in Monterrey, Mexico. Collectively, recent studies attribute the long-term mobility experiences and pathways of deportees to resource acquisition abroad and human agency and resiliency upon return—processes that are well documented among the larger return migrant populations.

Beyond the experiences of individual deportees, many scholars examine family separation and the devastating psychological hardships that immigration laws and deportation inflict on family members divided by national borders (Abrego 2014; Berger Cardoso et al. 2016; Boehm 2016; Caldwell 2019; Dreby 2012; Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2015; Hagan et al. 2008; Menjivar et al. 2016; Roberts et al. 2017; Schuster & Majidi 2015; Zayas 2015). These separations cause severe upheavals in families, disrupting every aspect of human life from the economic to the social to the most basic aspects of human bonding.

Fearing separation, many immigrant families have developed strategies to counter the deportation dragnet. Studies in Mexico document the increasing number of immigrant parents who are preemptively returning home with their partners and children, protesting with their feet against policing and threats of detention and deportation (Andrews 2018; Boehm 2016; Hernández-León et al. 2020). Some of these children were born abroad, thus constituting what Daniel Kanstroom rightly refers to as *de facto* deportations (Kanstroom 2012, p. 135). Nor are these *de facto* deportations restricted to Mexico. Somali parents, fearful of losing their children to incarceration for criminal offenses have sent their children to their homeland (Peutz 2010). These preemptive returns, while frequently leading to involuntary family reunification, paradoxically can also encourage the establishment of new families. At least two ongoing research projects find that some male deportees formed new families upon return, which

provided these men with new family support systems and promoted their feelings of self-worth and belonging (Maginot 2019).¹⁰

The history of migration is one of family separations, unifications, and reconfigurations. In the contemporary era of migration control and forced and preemptive returns these shifting transnational family configurations are even more dynamic and disruptive, more often than not leading to traumatic separation, but sometimes opening up opportunities for new relationships upon return and thus an enhanced sense of belonging, a reintegration pathway that warrants further study.

Future Research

Below we offer four directions for research that could enhance our empirical and theoretical understanding of the return experience:

- State and institutional actors. Emigration states are powerful actors in shaping the reception and reintegration of forced migrants (Waldinger 2015). Comparative work is needed to theorize how the return policies and practices of emigration states and their institutions shape the reintegration of forced and voluntary returnees across a variety of political systems, including autocratic regimes.
- Data collection considerations. More longitudinal and comparative studies of different groups of return migrants (e.g., forced and voluntary returnees; older and younger returnees; women and men) are needed to understand how resiliency and adaptability shape return migrants' long-term mobility pathways. These studies could explore the ways in which absence from the homeland and removal experiences interact with

¹⁰ Interview with authors' Return Migration Project research team, Summer 2015.

remitted human and financial capital and institutional contexts of reception to shape the reintegration trajectories of forced returnees over time.

- Transnational families. More research is needed to explore how members of transnational families reconfigure relationships, gender roles, and perceived obligations, and how those reconfigurations influence reintegration and ultimately the decision to stay in the homeland or re-migrate abroad.

INTEGRATING RETURN MIGRATION SCHOLARSHIPS

Return migration is an integral yet undertheorized dimension of international migration. Some of the first attempts to theorize return migration generated typologies and conceptualizations that assumed returns were voluntary and permanent (Cerase 1974; Gmelch 1980; King 1986). These early assumptions, coupled with a growing interest in the relationship between return migration and economic development, have led to a burgeoning scholarship on the economic implications of return, which draws on the NELM to investigate how migrants can facilitate economic development through the transfer and mobilization of financial capital into business ventures.

This early economic literature largely ignores studies that comprise the political sociology of return migration—scholarship that examines how states and other institutional actors mediate the subjective experience of forced returnees who face stigmatization and economic marginalization, often resulting in plans to re-migrate. This more recent scholarship, while important for its attention to how origin states and institutions shape return, is also limited because it neglects forced returnees' capacities to control their own destinies through the mobilization and deployment of resources from abroad.

What links these two literatures is their central concern with long-term economic pathways of return migrants. Some of the most innovative and theoretically engaged studies apply the “resource mobilization” framework developed by Cassarino (2004) to investigate return migrants’ long-term labor market mobility. Cassarino posits that labor market reintegration depends upon the accumulation and carefully prepared mobilization of resources prior to return, which he argues can be disrupted by an unplanned departure such as deportation. Building on this idea, some economic and political sociologists find that the state and institutional context of return also shapes migrants’ initial labor market re-entry, with deportation pushing these unprepared returnees into poverty on the margins of their local economies. By adopting a longitudinal lens, however, studies find that over time some deported migrants experience economic mobility, thus suggesting that while resource mobilization may begin abroad, it continues to unfold upon return as migrants exercise their own agency to assess local labor market opportunities and then deploy accumulated tangible and intangible resources.

We propose a broad framework to guide future research on return migration and reintegration, one that accommodates both the experiences of those who return voluntarily and deportees, rejected asylum seekers, and others who have been forced home. We argue that reintegration pathways of return migrants depend not only on 1) the accumulation of resources and 2) readiness for return, as argued by Cassarino, but also on 3) sending state and institutional and family contexts of reception and 4) opportunities to mobilize resources in local economies to which migrants return. Scholars need to consider and integrate these factors carefully when conducting research on the social, political, and economic dimensions of return.

Careful consideration of each of these factors requires more methodological engagement and innovation. Most studies comprising the political sociology of return are interpretive in

scope and rely on qualitative and micro-level analyses to demonstrate that deportation causes downward mobility and negative experiences upon return. In contrast, studies comprising the economic sociology of return are largely positivist and rely on econometric methods to prove that resources accumulated abroad lead to labor market mobility and economic development. Going forward, scholars who adopt a more balanced and contextualized approach to the study of the return migration will find ample territory for valuable, even synergistic, contributions to the literature.

Enhanced theoretical and empirical approaches to the study of return migration will allow scholars to better understand the implications of international migration for social, economic, and political development and inequality in sending communities. As studies across time and space have shown, migrants are reflexive and resilient actors who are capable of overcoming structural barriers, accumulating valuable resources abroad, and fueling development. Return migrants contribute to development when they mobilize accumulated human and financial capital in their sending countries. However, these resource mobilization patterns occur within political and economic opportunity structures at home and abroad. State and institutional actors can marginalize migrants and limit their development potential through deportation, stigmatization, and criminalization. Yet reintegration also depends on how migrants adapt their resource mobilization strategies in response to adversity. To recognize the human costs of deportation, but also the true development potential of international migrants, scholars should move away from exclusively economic or political perspectives and develop integrated models that reflect the contextual and individual heterogeneity inherent to return migration and resource mobilization.

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