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In Adjusting to New Labor Markets, Migrants Draw on Past Experience and Retain a Strong Sense of Pride in Being Able to Contribute

Popular notions of migrants as unskilled or uneducated laborers, while sometimes true, are often false. Their jobs back home may not have always ensured adequate income, a factor that could have played a role in their decision to migrate, but they often required some technical knowledge or training. Our subjects had worked as photographers, teachers, accountants, sociologists, and business owners. Some were property owners, tending to farms and livestock or selling various kinds of merchandise out of their home. In many of the interviews, it also became apparent that these jobs had clearly formed an unshakeable part of their identity. Their work gave them pride and a sense of satisfaction in being able to contribute.

Departure from home often thrust our subjects into job markets that rarely permitted them to utilize the skill-set they had acquired back home, though it did resolve their immediate need for money. Most jobs that presented themselves were in the informal sector, under the table, off the radar, and highly unregulated. Sometimes conditions were dangerous and payment unguaranteed. Very often, tasks were physically demanding and even injurious. Our interviews posed a number of questions: How did taking on physical tasks, whether menial or punishing or both, impact their sense of identity? How did they find work and how did they market themselves? Did they ever incorporate previously attained skills? When finding work failed, how did they cope, especially if they couldn't rely on savings or remittances from family or friends? Underlying each of these questions was our search for how our subjects' patchwork of livelihoods impacted their overall sense of self.

Although what and who we are certainly includes more than what we do for a living, research shows that our jobs influence how we perceive ourselves.¹ For many, the jobs we do give us a sense of identity. In the U.S., 55 percent of workers get a sense of identity from their jobs.² This is even more true for college-educated workers. Regardless of our feelings towards our work, what we do for a living often gives us a heightened awareness of our value, which (depending on the situation) can give us the confidence we need to cope, improvise, or adapt to a new situation. This was certainly true for the migrants we interviewed. The funds our migrant subjects gathered in advance of their travel, however, seldom sufficed for the entire journey. In fact, a few of the participants in our study arrived in the Americas (typically Brazil or Ecuador) with just a few hundred dollars in their pocket. These initial funds were usually borrowed from friends and family, taken from savings, or—for those who had more time to prepare—obtained from pledging some physical asset that possessed liquid value, such as property or livestock. Numerous business owners referenced selling their business, such as a restaurant, a clothing store, or a convenience store, to obtain their travel funds. Regardless of how they secured it, much of it was used on their initial flight across the Atlantic Ocean.³

As a result, they resorted to a combination of formal and informal labor along the way, as well as to borrowing money from family, fellow travelers, or friendly locals. As one Cameroonian put it in Capurganá, Colombia, “sometimes you have a good Samaritan who gives you something that should have been a cost.” The ability of migrants to access local labor markets throughout their journey varied from country to country. Some countries clearly stood out as places where migrants struggled and others where they managed and were able to put their skills to use. Most countries, including Costa Rica, have a system for obtaining work once granted asylum (not during the waiting period), but even with this legal

status in hand, jobs were limited to certain sectors that may or may not correspond with prior experience.⁴ Government officials from Costa Rica told researchers that migrants granted asylum with law degrees have been unable to perform legal work in Costa Rica because the labor department did not permit it. By and large, however, participants were not seeking asylum in Costa Rica and instead accessed the labor market at the mercy of charitable employers.

Brazil was routinely mentioned as a place that provided migrants ample access to paid work. A group of Pakistani men said they found work there easily upon arrival. Others used their networks to seek out opportunities. “God bless, Brazil,” one Ghanaian said during an interview in northern Costa Rica. “There, I met a politician who helps strangers from Africa, who fought to get me a job. At first, I worked for a chicken company, but that didn’t pay very well. Then my boss said she had a cousin who worked for a telecommunications company in Porto Alegre. He came and drafted on the blackboard how the work is going to be and what the pay is.” The Ghanaian said it was a good job that provided him with two prepaid credit cards—one for food and another for other expenses. It also provided a reward card for hard work. Though inspired to leave his country after experiencing political strife, one Nigerian man admitted that he chose to go to São Paulo after a friend living in Brazil told him how easy it was to find work.

Another Ghanaian, a man in his mid-thirties, described how throughout his journey, which took him first to Cuba and later to Guyana, he had to adapt and perform jobs he had never done before. After two months in Havana, where he found no work, he went to Guyana, where someone at a local mosque helped him find work with a Chinese gold mining company deep in the jungle. He was there for two weeks, working long hours and performing dangerous duties, but he was never paid. He decided to leave and returned to the mosque to tell the man

1 Gini, Al. “Work, Identity and Self: How We Are Formed by the Work We Do.” *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 17, (7), May 1998, 707-714. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25073117>.

2 Gallup, Inc. “In U.S., 55% of Workers Get Sense of Identity from Their Job.” Gallup.com, August 22, 2014, news.gallup.com/poll/175400/workers-sense-identity-job.aspx.

3 This experience was not as common for South Asians, who paid a sum that would take them all the way to their final destination, relied on a much more sophisticated network, and arranged for payments to be sent to their smugglers in installments. They still fell victim to robberies and bribery, however, and therefore were often unable to pay for basic necessities.

4 World Bank. “Refugees’ Right to Work and Access to Labor Markets – An Assessment. Part I: Synthesis.” Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD). September 2016. Accessed April 25, 2018. http://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/KNOMAD%20Study%201%20Part%20I-%20Assessing%20Refugees%27%20Rights%20to%20Work_final.pdf

what had happened. The man advised him to go to Brazil, where he secured a fairly steady and profitable job working as a trash collector for nine months in the southern region. It was tough work, requiring him to maintain a light jog throughout the entire day, but he saved enough to bring him all the way to Costa Rica.

Colombia, on the other hand, was often described as the place where migrants struggled the most for cash. “Of \$1,000, you will pay \$800 in Colombia,” a Cameroonian in Capurganá said. The expenses sometimes begin as soon as migrants cross the border between Ecuador and Colombia by bus, where many reported being robbed. Bribery to Colombian officials also becomes requisite for moving forward. These experiences continue through the Darién Gap to Panama, where migrants arrive extremely dehydrated, malnourished, and penniless. One young Nepali interviewed in Capurganá described being locked in a room for 12 days. These desperate conditions force migrants to unite and borrow money from one another.

Moving to a new place where they didn’t know the language and were not legally permitted to work created pressure on migrants to adapt old skills to new jobs. A male Bangladeshi in his late twenties said he would go to different restaurants every day in La Paz, Bolivia, searching for work. Eventually he found one that hired him to clean dishes in the kitchen, and which did not require him to speak Spanish (a language he didn’t know). One young man said he was eager to find a job in construction because it was what he did in Sierra Leone. “I have my permit,” he said, going so far as to take out the permit, which he had kept in his wallet the entire journey, to show to his interviewers. “. . . but I will take whatever job I can get,” he added, putting the permit away.

Being in a new place where foreignness could serve as a disadvantage in the presence of those unfriendly to migrants also forced them to adopt strategies for blending in. The Nigerian man previously mentioned was uncomfortable speaking to us at the grocery store in La Cruz, Costa Rica, where he was fortunate to find a job bagging groceries. He already had

too many attributes that marked him as a foreigner. Speaking to others in English only added to that perception. He much preferred speaking in private at the hotel.

Not all countries offered the plentiful work opportunities found in Brazil and Ecuador, a fact that required migrants to hustle, strategize, and use their ingenuity to scrounge up enough money to pay for the next leg of their journey. A Cameroonian man interviewed in Turbo, Colombia, described going into random businesses and pantomiming sweeping and cleaning actions but to no avail. Another Cameroonian man interviewed in La Cruz, Costa Rica, described running errands on the streets of Turbo to help pay for his boat ride across the Gulf of Urabé. There, he figured out a new tactic to earn back the money he lost after being robbed. He learned to employ goodwill as a way of currying favor with people. He started first by developing a relationship with the boatman, promising to bring him ten people to make the trip from Turbo to Capurganá. After two weeks, he brought him sixteen people instead, earning himself not just a discount for the boat ride but also a free pass into the jungle once they reached Capurganá. In the jungle, recalled by most as a desperate journey, he described helping others carry their belongings in exchange for food. Interestingly, he credited many of these tactics with his experience as a teacher in Cameroon. For him, the act of bartering felt very reminiscent of teaching given the fact that so much of the satisfaction one draws from education extends beyond mere compensation. “I have a passion for teaching. I like educating people because every time I’m educating . . . I’m educating myself,” he said. He listed his profession as an educator as one of the things he missed most about home. The same Cameroonian man said he struggled with hunger throughout his time in Panama because the shelters didn’t provide food. He remained undeterred and found a new livelihood. He packaged bananas for the owner of a nearby farm and was able to make enough money to arrive in Costa Rica.

Contrary to the widespread perception that immigrants entering the United States or Canada are overwhelmingly uneducated and unskilled, research is actually telling a different story: a growing share of

migrants entering have increasingly higher levels of education.⁵ Our own study not only showed this, but also revealed the pride migrants take in contributing and being able to adapt, hustle, and do what it takes to generate the income they need to achieve their twin goals of survival and gathering funds for the next stages of their journeys. No matter how much they needed to bend their capabilities to fit new demands, they still derived confidence from skills mastered in their countries of origin. They wanted and want to contribute.

Ghanaians were especially keen to share what they did previously, and some even suggested they would try to return to their work on reaching their final destination. A woman traveling on her own said proudly, “I am a designer and I also decorate.” When she reached the United States, she said, she was planning to meet a friend, who already had documents waiting for her. During one interview, the sense of familiarity and comfort that migrants can often associate with their previous jobs became apparent. A young man revealed his prior occupation only after

I pulled out a Canon camera to take a photograph of his hands. Upon seeing the camera, his eyes lit up as if seeing a familiar friend for the first time in months. Indeed, it was the same brand and model he used to have back in Ghana, where he worked professionally as a freelance photographer, taking photos of weddings and other major celebrations. He immediately asked to see the camera. Taking it into his hands, his whole demeanor changed. He grew quiet and concentrated with his eyes fixed on the camera’s buttons and features. For the first time since we started talking, he seemed to relax, perhaps bringing him a sense of normalcy at a time in his life that was anything but normal. For ten minutes he played with the camera’s settings, teaching me functions I had never learned. He instructed a fellow researcher where to stand when taking our picture together. It made me think that although moving across borders will inevitably bring you to places where the economy and the legality of your presence will redefine what you can do, nothing will ever take away the satisfaction that comes from doing something associated with pride and self-worth.

⁵ “MPI Reveals Striking Finding: Nearly Half of Immigrant Adults Arriving in U.S. since 2011 Have College Degree, a Sharp Increase over Earlier Groups.” Migrationpolicy.org, June 1, 2017, www.migrationpolicy.org/news/mpi-reveals-striking-finding-nearly-half-immigrant-adults-arriving-us-2011-have-college-degree.

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