

Book review

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Migration and the Transfer of Informal Human Capital

Authors: Izabela Grabowska and Agata Jastrzebowska

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What do sending countries gain when many people go abroad to work, except for the money (“remittances”) that labor migrants send back home? This intriguing question is central in the study *Migration and the Transfer of Informal Human Capital* by the Polish researchers Izabela Grabowska and Agata Jastrzebowska. The study is about labor migrants from Central Europe who work in Europe and Mexicans who work in the USA. The difference between both migrant groups is that Mexican labor migrants are generally low-skilled, whereas Central European labor migrants often have a higher educational level, although many work below their formal qualifications after migration, which is known as “brain waste.” Grabowska and Jastrzebowska examine whether this difference in background characteristics between Central Europeans and Mexicans affects the extent to which they acquire and transfer “informal human capital.”

The first chapter of the book introduces the issue. Chapter 2 gives a long theoretical exposé. Starting with Becker’s classical “human capital” theory, the chapter meanders through Sen and Nussbaum’s “capabilities approach”, the “aspirations-capabilities framework” from Carling and De Haas, and the notions of “psychological capital” (self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience) and “tacit knowledge” (everyday knowledge and experiences) that migrants obtain abroad, ending in a concise description of what this book is about: “Migration-Impacted Informal Human Capital” (abbreviated as MigCap). MigCap refers to non-certified knowledge and skills (the authors distinguish between mind skills, soft skills, maker skills, and life skills), which people acquire by learning-by-observing, learning-by-communicating, and learning-by-doing

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during migration (p. 27). MigCap has both an instrumental and intrinsic value for migrants. The instrumental value consists of financial and material benefits, while the intrinsic value concerns independence, life experience, self-efficacy, resilience, reflexivity, and optimism (p. 25). Finally, the authors distinguish two stages: the stage in which migrants acquire informal human capital and the stage in which they transfer it to their home country. Both stages contain factors that contribute to the acquisition and transfer of informal human capital, along with factors that obstruct these processes. A relevant concept missing in the theoretical overview is Levitt's notion of "social remittances" – namely the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital which migrants bring from receiving to sending countries – although the term does appear in later chapters.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology and data used in the book. The strength of the book is that it combines extensive statistical data and discussions of previous research with interviews about "close-up accounts of the migratory experiences of individuals" (p. 39). Chapter 4 elaborates existing data and research to describe the profiles of migrating and returning Mexicans and Central Europeans. A noteworthy difference between both groups – except for the mentioned difference in educational levels – is that the Mexican migration is more masculine while the Central European labor migration is more feminine. Furthermore, it is much easier for Central Europeans to settle and work in the rest of the European Union than for Mexican labor migrants to migrate to the USA. A noted similarity between both groups is their labor market position, both in terms of employment and unemployment. After migration, Central Europeans work more often in the hospitality and service sectors, while Mexican migrants primarily fill jobs in construction, agriculture, and domestic services.

The final two chapters contain the core of the argument in answer to the following questions: What do migrants learn from migration ("acquisition," chapter 5)? And more generally, what does it mean for sending countries ("transfer," chapter 6)? The idea that international migrants learn from migration is not new. Middle-class families have always sent their sons and daughters abroad to enrich their lives. The human capital component valued most by the labor migrants in the study refers to language and communication skills. Learning English not only opens professional doors ("language capital") but is equally important – as the authors show at length – for self-expression, self-confidence, informal learning processes, and of course, social relations. Second, migrants acquire soft skills such as teamwork, self-confidence, stress resilience, initiative, and flexibility. The study shows that employed migrants acquire more informal human capital than unemployed or inactive migrants and that long-term migrants acquire more informal human capital than short-stay migrants. As a seasonal

Polish migrant worker says: “I went there only to earn money. ... I can’t say that I learned anything new ... and I wasn’t open to it either” (p. 86). More in general, the authors claim that male Polish migrants are less open to acquiring human capital than both female Polish and Lithuanian migrants. Moreover, migrants acquire work-related skills such as flexibility and adaptability to changes, learn to deal with stress at work, skills in customer interaction, and services, but also coping with boredom, as an interviewee from Poland with an academic background explains: “When cleaning pub toilets, I realized how difficult these dirty and simple jobs are” (p. 97).

But what does MigCap mean for sending countries? Do the new ideas and skills of visiting or returned migrants actually affect the sending countries? Is there a transfer of informal knowledge or “brain circulation”? These matters are discussed in the final chapter of the book. The research first indicates gender differences. Male migrant workers work more often in construction and agriculture jobs while acquiring and transferring more technical skills. Female migrants work in service jobs more often where they acquire more social competences (p. 102). With regards to Mexicans working in the USA, the researchers found that working abroad improves migrants’ opportunities for economic mobility after their return to Mexico (p. 103). A survey among Polish and Lithuanian return migrants shows that about 60% of the interviewees declare they transferred various mind and soft skills; this refers particularly to those with higher education and in employment (p. 103). The authors refer to the *Matthew effect*: the better the educational and labor market position, the more MigCap migrants acquire and can transfer (p. 104). Furthermore, the destination countries matter. It seems that Central Europeans working in the Netherlands have a higher level of well-being than those in Germany and the UK because they learn from Dutch employees to draw a clear line between working time and leisure time (p. 109). Moreover, the book discusses the factors that obstruct skills transfer, namely migration-related prejudices (“you think you know better because you worked abroad”) and the fact that most successful migrants are less likely to return (p. 114).

More generally, the authors indicate that the transfer of MigCap requires opportunity structures: social environments in which MigCap components are noticed, recognized, valued, and applied. The fact that migrant workers often take low-status jobs while abroad results in the low recognition of the skills they acquired after return, which in turn hampers the transfer of MigCap (p. 125). On the other hand, knowledge acquisition and work experience abroad improve the employability of migrants after return. For employers in the sending countries, the knowledge migrants gained abroad can be a competitive advantage. Return migrants are known to stimulate innovation and new management models. In conclusion, MigCap acquired and strengthened abroad

can be effectively transferred in return societies, provided that migrants' experience abroad is socially recognized after return *and* that they can share their experience and skills with others. The particularly important benefits of international migration for both Mexicans and Central Europeans are communication skills (English), along with communicativeness, openness, and opportunities to establish interpersonal and intercultural contacts (p. 125).

To conclude, allow me to provide some evaluative remarks about the book. The book raises an intriguing research question: What do migrants and sending countries gain from international migration besides the financial remittances migrant workers send home? However, migration-impacted informal human capital (MigCap) or social remittances are very hard to "measure." It is extremely complicated to establish to what extent, how, and under what conditions are the knowledge and skills migrants acquired abroad transferred to the sending countries. Grabowska and Jastrzebowska's study faced this challenge. There are certainly weaknesses in their study. The theoretical chapter may be somewhat overtheorized to my taste, discussing too many different theoretical concepts, and the empirical chapters may sometimes be too descriptive in detail. Nevertheless, I can firmly state that the work is a brave and original project to study the complicated issues of migration labor.