

# To Emigrate or Not to Emigrate: A Sociocultural Understanding Of Mexican Professionals' Logic of (Im)mobility Emigrar o no emigrar: una interpretación sociocultural de la lógica de (in)movilidad de los profesionistas mexicanos

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## ABSTRACT

Languishing labor market conditions throughout Latin America, along with pull factors in countries such as the United States, point to continued and increased skilled migration from Latin America. The outflow of well-educated Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Peruvians, Venezuelans, Brazilians, and Mexicans in search of better incomes and career opportunities is well noted. Yet, important qualitative differences exist in terms of who does—and, important in this context who *does not*—emigrate and *why*? Drawing on interview data with Mexican professionals in Mexico City, in this article I suggest that social network theory is insufficient for understanding skilled migration from Mexico. Focusing on those who stay behind, I offer instead a sociocultural framework, one that emphasizes individuals' own discursive renderings and that acknowledges that individuals' decisions *not* to migrate are rooted in class-based dispositions, cultural beliefs, and social practices.

**Key words:** Mexico, skilled migration, migration decision-making process, cultural logic, social class.

## RESUMEN

El debilitamiento de las condiciones del mercado de trabajo en Latinoamérica, además de los factores de atracción en países como Estados Unidos, indican que la migración calificada continuará y se incrementará. El flujo de salida de salvadoreños, guatemaltecos, peruanos, venezolanos, brasileños y mexicanos bien preparados en busca de mejores salarios y oportunidades de desarrollo en sus carreras es evidente. Aun así, existen importantes diferencias cualitativas en términos de quién—y algo muy importante en este contexto, quién no—emigra y por qué. A partir de un trabajo con datos de entrevistas con profesionistas mexicanos en la Ciudad de México, en este artículo se sugiere que la teoría social de redes es insuficiente para entender la migración calificada desde México. El enfoque se centra en quienes se quedan, y se ofrece, en lugar de un marco sociocultural, uno que enfatiza las perspectivas propias del discurso de los individuos y que reconoce que las decisiones individuales de no migrar se encuentran enraizadas en situaciones basadas en la clase, las creencias culturales y las prácticas sociales.

**Palabras clave:** México, migración calificada, proceso de toma de decisiones migratorias, lógica cultural, clase social.

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## INTRODUCTION

Languishing labor market conditions and limitations to the development of research, science, and technology in countries throughout Latin America, as well as the pull factors present in developed countries, especially in the United States, point to the persistence of skilled migration from Latin America (IOM, 2009; Martínez Pizarro, n.d.; OECD-UNDESA, 2013). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2009), Latin America and the Caribbean is the area of the world with the highest relative growth of skilled migrants from 1990 to 2007. In the Andean region alone, the number of skilled migrants soared 162 percent during this period; Venezuela and Peru, in particular, witnessed a significant surge, 216 and 177 percent, respectively.

The increase of skilled migration by region and country can also be appreciated by examining migration rates.<sup>1</sup> Estimates for 2007 suggest that the emigration rates for El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala were 31.6, 31, 25.4, and 25.3 percent, respectively (IOM, 2009: 20). However, the outflow of well-educated Latin Americans in search of better incomes and career opportunities is not confined to smaller, poorer, and/or more isolated countries. Indeed, in the Latin American and Caribbean context, Mexico contributes a significant share to out-migration. Despite its comparatively lower emigration rate (16 percent), Mexico provides the largest stock of skilled migrants, mostly to the United States (IOM, 2009: 19). And, nowhere is the concern over Mexico's *fuga de cerebros*, or "brain drain," more pronounced than inside its very own borders.

The flight of intellectual capital from Mexico has long been publicly expressed and debated. Scholars and political pundits generally recognize two waves in the exodus of professionals from Mexico (Aráuz Torres and Wittchen, n.d.). The first spans the years 1982 to 1986, a period marked by profound structural adjustments (widespread privatization of state firms, labor market deregulation, and fiscal austerity) that not only sent the economy into a free fall but also many middle-class Mexicans to the United States, Canada, and Spain (Babb, 2001; Nevaer, 2007). The second pronounced exodus took place during Vicente Fox's administration (2004–2006), when employment opportunities for professionals stagnated (Aráuz Torres and Wittchen, n.d.). Focusing on Fox's last two years in office, Judith Zubieta García, from the UNAM Institute for Social Research, worried publicly about the emigration of intellectual capital, noting that "tens of thousands" of professionals and graduate degree holders

<sup>1</sup> Migration rates indicate the percentage of skilled people from a specific country who reside in a foreign country. In other words, when one examines emigration rates, one is essentially asking the question: how large or small is the number of outgoing skilled people compared to the number of people with the same educational level who remain in their country of origin?

emigrated from Mexico to places like the United States, Canada, France, and Germany (Nevaer, 2007). Echoing this concern, Zúñiga and Molina (2008) report that from 2000 to 2005, the share of new migrants to the U.S. with higher education (which includes those with bachelor's, master's, and professional degrees in areas like law and medicine, as well as doctoral degrees) increased from 3.2 to 4.4 percent. In absolute numbers, they estimated that this translated into average annual flows (for the 2000-2005 period) of slightly over 20 000 university-educated individuals.

Little question exists as to the increase in the volume of highly skilled Mexican emigrants (Clemens, 2014; Marmolejo, 2009; Zúñiga and Molina, 2008), most of whom are destined for the United States. Clemens (2014), who provides a decade-long view, suggests that between 2000 and 2010, the share of skilled Mexicans in the U.S. grew from 8 percent to 19 percent. Still, a number of qualifications with respect to such growth are important to highlight, particularly if one is to assess, for instance, the "problem" of brain drain, or the degree to which Mexican professionals, as compared to their other Latin American counterparts, emigrate or not. With respect to the former, we might consider that approximately one-fifth of Mexico's university-educated population lives abroad (Clemens, 2014). Clemens (2014) further notes that, although not negligible, this statistic does not constitute a significant qualitative shift in skilled migration. In terms of the latter, South American migrants, and in particular Peruvians, tend to be more educationally *selected* (emphasis in the original) than Mexican migrants (Takenaka and Pren, 2010: 179). Moreover, emigration rates indicate that in 1990, 2000, and estimates for 2007, El Salvador and Honduras, for instance, had significantly higher emigration rates than Mexico (IOM, 2009).<sup>2</sup> More recently, according to OECD statistics from 2010/2011 (published 2013), the emigration rate of Mexico's highly educated was 6 percent, compared to 19.6, 17.2, and 13.8 percent for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, respectively.

This scenario begs an important question. Compared to their South American counterparts, what accounts for the significantly lower rate of Mexico's skilled migration to the United States? This question, the focus of this article, becomes all the more compelling when we consider both the geographical proximity shared by the U.S. and Mexico, as well as the long history of migration from Mexico to the U.S. Indeed, the assumption is very often that, in a situation of economic hardship and less than optimal work or career prospects, Mexicans, and in particular, any Mexican who possesses the financial, human, and social capital to migrate to the United States will

<sup>2</sup> Small countries provide the highest percentage of skilled labor living abroad. On the contrary, countries with the lowest rate of skilled migration tend to be the most populated, such as Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Peru, and Chile. Mexico is the only exception to the rule: while it is the second most populated country in the region, 16 percent of its skilled labor resides abroad, mainly in the U.S. (IOM, 2009).

want to or will do so. This assumption is problematic for a number of reasons, one of which is our underestimation of the tendency of skilled Mexicans to migrate domestically. Clemens (2014: 5), for instance, observes that there is no greater tendency for Mexican skilled workers to migrate between countries than between Mexican states. Moreover, the presumption that any Mexican who possesses the financial, human, and social wherewithal to migrate to the U.S. will want to or will do so ignores important sociocultural aspects of the migration decision-making process. Borrowing from the words of De Jong (2000), it ignores the *expectations* skilled Mexicans hold about the advantages of their home community and the expected (possible) disadvantages of the destination community, in this case, the United States.

Here, in examining Mexico's lower rate of skilled migration to the U.S., I move beyond classical frameworks that theorize migration decision-making processes at the individual or household level, specifically, what is variously referred to as social network theory, chain migration, and cumulative causation (Kandel and Massey, 2002; MacDonald and MacDonald, 1974; Massey, 1987; Massey, Durand, and Malone, 2002; Tilly and Brown, 1967). Instead, I expand upon a sociocultural framework that puts a priority on individuals' own discursive renderings for remaining at home. Drawing on interview data, a crucial point I underscore throughout this article is that the decision *not* to emigrate, or what De Jong (2000) calls the *stay decision*—very much like the determination to leave, or the *move decision*—is, as Cohen and Sirkeci (2011) aptly note, an explicit decision. This *stay decision*, moreover, is one that is fundamentally rooted in individuals' class-based dispositions, their social practices, and cultural beliefs.

## LITERATURE

In Mexico, the flight of intellectual capital is a recurring issue that intermittently disappears and reappears on the public agenda in light of alarming statistics. Tuirán (2009), for instance, cites statistics from the *Encuesta Continua de Población* (Ongoing Population Survey) to stress that the most significant relative loss among Mexicans involves those who have the highest levels of education. Mexico's "brain drain," he notes, means that 442 000 Mexicans living in the United States have a bachelor's degree and approximately 110 000 have a master's or a doctorate. In addition to those with degrees, a stock of 811 000 Mexicans reside in the United States who have some university education but have not completed their degrees. In 2007, about 8 percent of the seven million Mexicans with advanced degrees lived in the United States (Rosenblum et al., 2012).

On the one hand, Mexico's "brain drain" is framed as an alarming issue and as detrimental to Mexico's economic development prospects (Marmolejo, 2009; Nevaer, 2007; Zinser, 2004; Zúñiga and Molina, 2008). In the words of Zúñiga and Molina, "Mexico's increasing loss of high-skilled labor creates a vicious circle between development and migration....The country is losing bright minds that might otherwise have provided innovation and accelerated technological progress in Mexico" (2008: 17). On the other hand, others see skilled migration not as a zero-sum game where the migration of individuals with human capital is framed as wholly or as necessarily a negative process. Clemens (2014: 2), for instance, maintains that skilled labor mobility can increase the yield of human capital investments, and moreover, "interacts with the incentives to invest in education in a way that can convert Mexican 'brain drain' into a 'brain gain'" (see also Boucher, Stark, and Taylor, 2009; McKenzie and Rapoport, 2010). Furthermore, Clemens (2014) cautions on the rush to overstate skilled migration from Mexico, and in particular, sets out to address the increased skill fraction among Mexico-U.S. migrants, said to have increased between 2000 and 2010 from 8 percent to 19 percent.

Various "intuitive" factors, Clemens (2014) notes, have shaped skilled migration flows and patterns. For instance, 29 percent of the growth in the skilled share is explained by the fact that many of the emigrants arrived in the U.S. as minors and were thus educated in the United States, not in Mexico. And in fact, he underscores that the rate of growth between 2000 and 2010 diminishes if only the people who arrived to the United States after the age of 18 are taken into account. In addition, 28.5 percent of the growth is due to the fact that, between 2000 and 2010, the unemployment rate grew much more among unskilled Mexicans than among skilled Mexicans. This trend, Clemens (2014: 8) maintains, tends to favor skilled migration relative to unskilled migration, with this tendency reversing with the stabilization of employment. Finally, 10.4 percent of the growth can be attributed to the fact that, as indicated by Chiquiar and Salcedo (2013), from 2000 to 2010, investments in education meant that the educational level of the Mexican labor force generally grew. Thus, the incentive for skilled Mexicans to emigrate is all the more pronounced in a situation in which Mexico's supply of educated individuals is growing almost five times faster than overall population growth, but in which domestic opportunities for professionals are not keeping up with supply (Zúñiga and Molina, 2008). Taken together, these factors explain roughly two-thirds of the presumed growth rate of Mexican skilled migration to the United States between 2000 and 2010, and thus, according to Clemens (2014: 8), "do nothing to alter the fundamental dynamic that drives skilled migration."

While some scholars have been preoccupied with the growth of Mexican skilled migration, others, including Takenaka and Pren (2010), are concerned with the variation

of skilled migration across countries in Latin America. In particular, these authors are concerned with the significant difference between the skill levels of Peruvian and Mexican emigrants. The relatively high educational level of South American emigrants, for example, contrasts starkly with that of Mexican emigrants. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 59 percent of persons in the United States who were born in Argentina, 53 percent of those born in Peru, 46 percent who were born in Columbia, and 37 percent of those born in Ecuador had some college education. Among those in the United States who were born in Mexico, only 14 percent had attended college (Takenaka and Pren, 2010). Furthermore, Peruvian migrants are twice as educated as Mexican migrants (14.8 and 6.2 years, respectively). And, as captured by the higher ratio between the schooling of migrants and non-migrants, Peruvians are also more *selected* [emphasis in the original] than Mexican emigrants (Takenaka and Pren, 2010: 179).

In light of the above, Takenaka and Pren (2010: 179) question *why* such an educational differential exists. While they acknowledge that they “do not fully understand why...there is such a large difference between Peru and Mexico,” in each setting, they account for it by focusing on migrants’ social capital. That is, they understand the presence, development, and nature of migrant networks as crucial for determining who leaves and who does not. Takenaka and Pren’s explanation is no doubt buttressed by prominent studies of international migration to the U.S., particularly, Massey’s extensive studies (see for instance, 1987; 1990) and those of Massey and colleagues (see Kandel and Massey, 2002; Massey, Durand, and Malone, 2002). These studies underscore that while “international migration may originate in the structure of sending and receiving societies...once it has begun, it eventually develops a social infrastructure that enables movement on a mass basis” (Massey, 1987: 1373). Moreover, Massey maintains that this movement is made possible by virtue of possessing what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 119) call a “durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.”

Indeed, as Takenaka and Pren (2010: 189) note, Peruvian migrants hail from the upwardly mobile middle-class. Peruvian migrants’ high educational levels can be explained by their access to and use of relatively recent —albeit well-established— social networks that tend to replicate their own educational characteristics. In the Mexican context, however, migrants have historically been poor and uneducated. Therefore, largely as a consequence of this history, social capital operates to influence the movement *not* of educated professionals but of poor, uneducated, and, often, undocumented migrants. Consequently, Takenaka and Pren (2010) implicitly deduce that, comparatively speaking, Mexico’s lower rate of skilled migrants may be explained in terms of the absence of such networks that have otherwise historically helped lower-class Mexicans migrate to and settle in the United States.

Social capital, the “auspices” of migration (Tilly and Brown, 1967) and “cumulative causation” (Kandel and Massey, 2002), is no doubt central to understanding migration dynamics. As Takenaka and Pren’s (2010) research suggests, it is particularly key to understanding Peruvian professionals’ migration patterns. I propose, however, that the implicit deduction that suggests that Mexican professionals’ lack of social networks might account for Mexico’s comparatively lower rates of skilled migration, does not wholly account for skilled migration patterns in the Mexican context. It is important to acknowledge, for example, that while skilled migrants may not have access to the same kinds of robust family networks that have long been available to less-educated Mexicans, professional networks, many of them extensive, have long existed.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, we might consider, for example, various factors that may make family/social networks redundant for Mexican professionals. Not unlike other Latin American professionals, Mexicans endowed with human capital (skills and education) are likely to absorb the high economic and social costs associated with migration. Not only do Mexican professionals, many of whom migrate to the U.S. with H-1B visas (and also, although less frequently, with TN visas), have the financial wherewithal to seek legal status, but many also have the kind of cultural capital needed to arrive and adapt to life in the United States. Indeed, given Mexico/U.S. relations and the two countries’ geographical proximity, many Mexican professionals, if not fluent, have at least a moderate command of the English language, and, moreover, many have direct familiarity with U.S. American culture, traditions, and practices, often through leisure travel, study abroad, and/or visits to friends and extended family. One might argue, therefore, that such human and cultural capital might mitigate Mexican professionals’ need for, or else make redundant, family/social networks in the U.S.

Certainly, *why* the vast majority of Mexican professionals choose to remain in Mexico rather than emigrate requires both macro- and micro-level understandings of (im)mobility. At the macro-level, for example, some scholars cite immigration policy as a major obstacle for skilled migration from Mexico. Although Mexican professionals can often absorb the costs of migrating legally, the fact remains that H-1B visas are expensive and involve a time-consuming application process. Furthermore, since annual quotas limit private sector firms to a specified number of H-1B visas, they are in short supply. Orrenius and Streitfeld (2006: 11) note that the H-1B quota

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Mexican Professionals Network in Washington, D.C.; the NYC Latino Professionals network; and, other large and small professional networks that exist throughout the country and that operate under the aegis of local and regional Chambers of Commerce.



of 65 000 was reached well in advance of the end of the 2004, 2005, and 2006 fiscal years: "With the backlog of applications growing, the 2007 allocation was exhausted in July 2006 before the start of the 2007 fiscal year." In 2013, even amidst growing anti-immigrant sentiment, in an effort to attract highly skilled foreign talent, the U.S. Senate approved an immigration reform bill that eliminated "caps on the number of green cards available to foreign citizens working in the United States who hold a U.S. graduate degree in science and other critical areas" (Velasco, 2013). Still, like social network explanations, an immigration policy that restricts Mexican skilled migration to the U.S. does not fully or adequately account for the social and cultural practices that, in the words of Cohen and Sirkeci (2011: x) "sometimes check migration patterns."

In what follows, I highlight Mexicans professionals' own discursive renderings for "staying behind." In particular, I focus attention on their subjective expectations, informed as these are by their class-based dispositions, cultural beliefs, and social practices.

## METHODOLOGY

The interview data I present here is an extension of two years of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Mexico City between 2003 and 2005.<sup>4</sup> As a follow-up to that research, I conducted interviews with 10 individuals in July 2012 in Mexico City; I also present these findings here. Consistent with a qualitative research paradigm, I purposely selected individuals who could illuminate skilled migration decision-making processes, given their profiles and experiences as Mexican professionals. Thus, as with all qualitative research, the sample was not random and therefore the findings are not generalizable. However, this study provides detailed insight into the phenomenon of skilled migration decision-making processes and points the way for further inquiry into this area.

I conducted a total of five semi-structured, in-depth interviews (see Appendix - Open-ended Interview Guide). Of the five interviews, one was done in a group, with the participation of six individuals; and, another was with a married couple that participated in a joint interview. With the exception of two people, I knew all other participants from my previous ethnographic research. In total, the views and experiences of 10 self-identified Mexican professionals are reported on here. Six interviewees

<sup>4</sup> The ethnographic research I conducted in Mexico City between 2003 and 2005 served as the basis for my doctoral dissertation, "Crisis in *Foxilandia*: Neoliberal Restructuring and the Work Lives of Mexican Professionals during the Fox Administration (2000-2006)."



were females aged 24 to 47. The four male interviewees' ages ranged from 35 to 59. All interviewees have a formal educational level above the national average. At the time of the interviews, two had medical degrees (MDS), with surgical specializations; one had a doctorate (Ph.D.); two had master's degrees; and one interviewee was enrolled in a master's degree program, which she had not yet completed. The remaining four had bachelor's degrees. At the time of the interviews, of the ten interviewees, nine were employed in full-time permanent positions.

The interviews lasted between two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half hours and were semi-structured and recorded. I relied on an interview guide to cover key themes and address essential questions that initially emerged from my larger 2003-2005 ethnographic project and that examined how Mexican professionals made sense of economic and workplace restructuring during Vicente Fox's historic "administration of change." As part of that research, a key topic revolved around the strategies they adopted to cope with job insecurity and instability during a time when unemployment was having a disproportionate impact on those with the highest level of education. As a coping strategy, at least discursively, migration, especially to the U.S., was rarely, if ever, an option for the Mexican professionals whom I interviewed. Thus, in July 2012, I pursued explicitly and more systematically the topic of migration as a (possible) strategy for coping with insecure and unstable employment and for expanding one's employment opportunities. Here, I also examined Mexican professionals' perceptions of the United States and their attitudes toward U.S. Americans. All my interviewees have travelled to the U.S. at one point or another, most of them on numerous occasions; and, two interviewees have lived and worked in the U.S. for an extended period of time in the past.

To analyze my interview data, I followed a procedure typical of qualitative research. I used Transana, a qualitative data management and analysis software tool. My analysis followed an inductive process, whereby particular themes emerged from the interview data as I examined it for content and patterns that would shed light on the questions guiding my research. I assigned codes (key words and phrases) throughout all the transcripts. Then, I re-examined the data associated with each code in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the nature of social practices and cultural beliefs identified in the interview transcripts. Finally, I examined associations between and among codes, determining how they were interrelated in ways that suggested Mexican professionals' explanations for their (im)mobility.

Skilled migration from Mexico is a complex process. Certainly, the present analysis is neither meant to generally call into question social network theory nor challenge macro-level explanations of mobility (for example, pulls and pushes of wage and labor markets, or immigration policies). In offering the present analysis, my

goal is much more modest: namely, to encourage further exploration of the local meanings of (im)mobility—in particular, from the perspective of the non-movers—so as to deepen and broaden our understanding of Mexican skilled migration.<sup>5</sup>

## MEXICAN PROFESSIONALS' (UN)EMPLOYMENT PREDICAMENT

If we focus on the period of Vicente Fox's administration (2000-2006), acknowledged by many to mark the second wave of skilled migration from Mexico, the (un)employment scenario for Mexican professionals was less than inspiring. In 2004, for instance, 684 000 Mexicans with university degrees were unemployed (INEGI, 2004a). And, in 2005, people with college and university educations had a 35-percent unemployment rate compared with 11 percent for people who had not completed their primary education (INEGI, 2005). As for wages, in Mexico City in January 2006, professionals earned from US\$6 to US\$15 a day (this includes those working in jobs ranging from newspaper reporter to social worker to nurse). Indeed, far from being the beneficiaries of job and government program expansions (campaign promises made by the once presidential hopeful, Vicente Fox), Mexican professionals were instead coping with mounting economic pressures brought about by the downsizing, job losses, and low wages that characterized Fox's administration (Ochoa Álvarez, 2008). Well after Fox's tenure, the (un)employment among Mexican professionals leaves much to be desired. In the first, second, and third quarters of 2013, respectively, 149 630, 146 775, 119 753 people with higher education were unemployed (compared to 30 261, 31 200, and 39 566, respectively, of those who had completed primary schooling).

In light of the difficult (un)employment and economic prospects Mexican professionals face, *why* are they not emigrating in significantly larger numbers? As I noted earlier, various explanations have been offered, including the high costs of skilled migration, given that Mexican professionals are more likely to seek legal status in order to practice their professions outside Mexico. Also, as mentioned earlier, others such as Takenaka and Pren (2010) have noted the absence of social networks for Mexican professionals. These explanations are no doubt worthy of consideration. Nonetheless, alone, they mask the ways in which immobility is very often both an explicit decision to “stay put” and a critical statement on the part of Mexican professionals

<sup>5</sup> In 2015, I conducted a dozen subsequent intensive open-ended interviews with Mexican professionals, all of whom held visas to reside and work in Washington, D.C. In that I conducted these interviews after the submission of this article for publication, findings from these interviews are not included here. However, they do show some themes that are consistent with the earlier sample and further complicate skilled migrants' decision-making processes with respect to “staying put” or migrating.

to undermine their rich and powerful neighbor(s) to the North, all the while “remaining integral” to their definition of national “identity and belonging” (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011: 92). Here then, I maintain that Mexican professionals’ logic of (im)mobility needs to be understood as rooted in certain class-based dispositions, cultural beliefs, and social practices. It is to this that we can now turn our attention.

#### On Money, Comfort, and the “Middle-Class” Habitus

If someone offered to pay me triple what I make now, I would leave! I have no problem. Of course I would take advantage of the triple salary! But, I would stay for a couple of years and then I would return [to Mexico]. You can be sure of that! But, I won’t and can’t go to the U.S., because the reality is that I cannot make triple there what I now make here. I can’t work in the U.S. doing what I do here. – Mariana, cardiac surgeon, Mexico City

The remarks above by Mariana, a surgeon in her mid-30s, gets at the complicated nature of Mexican professionals’ logic of (im)mobility. On the one hand, she weighs the allure of “higher” pay in the U.S., and on the other hand, she is keenly aware of the constraints in terms of the transferability of her human capital. Mariana is a physician with a specialty in general surgery and a sub-specialty in cardiac surgery. In addition, she has a master’s degree in hospital administration. In recent correspondence, she prefaced disclosure of her earnings with the somewhat self-conscious request that I “not laugh” at her meager earnings. For the fiscal year 2013, she earned US\$18 000 (approximately US\$1 500 a month) working part time in one of Mexico City’s public hospitals where she has been employed for close to 12 years. For several years now, to supplement her part-time work she has contracted with a private practice as a consultant and surgeon. Such contract work is highly variable and dependent on the number of surgeries Mariana is able to schedule. In 2013, her gross income from contract work was approximately US\$12 000, bringing her total earnings to US\$30 000 for the year.

Faring only slightly better than Mariana, Natalia, a surgeon specialized in pediatric cardiology and who earlier had joked that she would leave for the U.S. were she offered triple her current salary, earns approximately US\$45 000 annually.<sup>6</sup> Natalia holds a master’s and a doctoral degree in the medical sciences, and, moreover, occupied a competitive fellowship as a resident at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

<sup>6</sup> The annual incomes I state for both Mariana and Natalia are their net earnings. Moreover, it is important to take into account the fact that many physicians in Mexico do not individually pay for or carry liability insurance (This is not a question I directly asked Mariana or Natalia and, therefore, I cannot say for sure if they do or do not pay for liability insurance.). Thus, while U.S. physicians make significantly more than Mexican physicians, they must purchase their own liability insurance and also pay high income taxes.

As a point of contrast, in 2012 in the U.S., median pay for physicians and surgeons, not disaggregated by specialty—the Bureau of Labor Statistics does not track physician salaries by specialty—was equal to or greater than US\$187 200 per year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). According to a different source, the American Medical Group Association, cardiac and thoracic surgeons, who make substantial salaries even at the beginning of their careers (an estimated US\$360 000 per year), earn a median yearly income of US\$533 084 (see *Decker, n.d.*).

Indeed, those whom I interviewed were keenly attuned to the wage differential that exists between Mexico and the U.S. It is not lost on them that not only do their U.S. counterparts earn substantially more there, but also that Mexican-born professionals residing there have higher earnings. Zúñiga and Molina (2008: 11) note, “Degree-educated individuals in Mexico have an average monthly income that is six to seven times lower than that of Mexican-born professionals residing in the United States (US\$475 and US\$2 813, respectively).” It is also the case that skilled Mexicans’ professional attainment possibilities, including wages, are significantly lower compared to other immigrant groups (for example, Central American and Canadian immigrants) who have professional or graduate degrees (Flores, 2010; Takenaka and Pren, 2010; Zúñiga and Molina, 2008).

Thus, my interviewees’ allure of “higher” earnings in the U.S. was, in reality, tempered by their equally keen awareness that their human capital could not be easily transferred. Indeed, access to a well-paying job in the United States depends not only on the possession of human capital but also on the structural organization of U.S. labor markets, including but not limited to credentialing and job availability.<sup>7</sup> The odds of securing a highly skilled job “were somewhat greater in the 1970s than in recent decades, though the odds of getting a skilled job have generally been improving” (Flores, 2010: 200). Particularly problematic for Mexican professionals is the prospect of underemployment, or what the literature calls “brain waste,” which is when individuals take jobs below their educational level, skills, and expertise. In 2007, 33 percent of all Mexicans in the U.S. with a bachelor’s degree or higher were employed in transport/production, construction/maintenance, and cleaning and/food preparation, the very sectors that provide jobs for 75 percent of less-educated Mexican migrants (Zúñiga and Molina, 2008: 10). Thus, those I interviewed recognized that if they were to leave for the U.S., they would face the same employment

<sup>7</sup> More research is needed to delineate, for example, the extent to which the limits in terms of the transferability of human capital impacts Mexican professionals’ considerations in deciding to migrate or “stay put.” What would it take, for instance, for Mariana and Natalia to practice their medical specializations in the U.S.? What visas would they need to apply for, and are such visas widely available or are their numbers restricted?

constraints there as they currently do in Mexico. In other words, they would likely be performing jobs that do not require their level of education. While underemployment is a coping strategy Mexican professionals often resort to in their own country, their narratives suggest that this is something they are little prepared to be subjected to or to accept in the United States.

Expanding this sentiment expressed by Mexican professionals gets at their class-based dispositions, thereby highlighting their logic of (im)mobility. Two matters are important to address here: one, Mexican professionals' outright rejection of *gringos'* characterization and treatment—whether real or perceived—of Mexicans as second-class citizens; two, Mexican professionals' recognition of the fact that, were they to leave for the United States, their earnings and modest financial cushion would not allow them the same standard of living they currently enjoy in Mexico. Mexico's significantly lower cost of living (Orrenius and Streitfeld, 2006: 12) and its stark economic and social disparities means that Mexican professionals' paychecks go farther in Mexico than they would in the U.S. Consider a comment made by Natalia, the pediatric cardiologist. In a joking tone that sparked laughter from those participating in the group interview, she noted that while an offer of double her salary would not inspire her to leave for the U.S. an offer of triple her salary might persuade her. She states,

I am happy in Mexico. I love my country. And, I hate the *gringos*. But, if the price was right, triple what I am earning now, and I am going to have a better quality of life, I could leave. But then again, not even this will be [a deciding factor]. No. At this level, it's not likely that one could live that much better in the U.S. than here.

Following Natalia's comment, the group erupts in laughter, presumably at the foolishness of the idea that one could actually have a superior quality of life in the U.S. compared to that currently enjoyed by professionals in Mexico. Take Mariana, for instance, who, for most of her adult life has lived in apartment buildings. But not even her longing for a patio, garden, or green space would motivate her to leave for the United States. She notes, "Even if in the U.S. I could have a house with a garden, I can't throw away what I have now, here in Mexico, as a cardiac surgeon." Agreeing with Mariana, Adrián, who holds an upper mid-level position at Bancomer bank adds, "It is true that what we [professionals] earn [in Mexico] allows us to live a pretty comfortable life." In Adrián's case, this comfortable life includes ownership of a modest two-bedroom/one-bathroom apartment, a housekeeper, his paid-off sporty Volkswagen Golf vehicle, membership in a private health club, twice-yearly vacations to Europe and the U.S., and regular outings to restaurants, dance clubs, and cultural events.

The same holds true in Mariana's case, with the exception that she does not own but rather rents her apartment, and owns a new BMW. Among my participants, ownership of a vehicle is no small matter. As both Mariana and Adrián make clear, riding the subway, that is, the use of public transportation, is undesirable among many Mexican professionals.

That Mexico's low cost of living and its stark economic disparities allow Mexican professionals to stretch their paychecks, and thus affords them a comfortable living, is exemplified by the kind of life enjoyed by Carla and Bruno, who participated in the interview jointly. They have been married for 17 years and have one son. With a yearly income of approximately US\$170 000, they own a lovely, spacious three-level house with four bedrooms, three bathrooms, green spaces, and a fully-finished basement that served as Carla's textile and art workshop. They purchased their home in May 2003 for US\$325 000 and it is now currently worth US\$500 000. More recently, in February 2012, they purchased an apartment in a luxury residential building, which they currently rent to a relative, as an investment for their 10-year-old son. Carla and Bruno own three vehicles: a 2004 Audi, a 2007 Mazda, and a 2010 Honda. Since their son entered school, he has only attended private institutions. At the time of our interview, school tuition for their son consisted of a yearly registration fee (US\$925) and monthly tuition of US\$540.

While Carla and Bruno have never hired someone full time to care for their son (in large part owing to the fact that Carla only intermittently works part time), they employ Doña María, their housekeeper/cook, who works for them Monday through Friday for a total of seven hours daily. Carla notes that they pay Doña María on a weekly basis. In doing the calculations out loud, Bruno discloses that, on a monthly basis, her salary comes out to US\$415. Somewhat self-consciously, Carla adds that Doña María eats two meals a day at their house while on the job, and that she very often gives her "extras." Bruno echoes this point and adds that often they pay for Doña María's medical bills. In addition to Doña María, who has been working for them for close to a decade, Carla and Bruno employ another woman, who performs specific tasks such as ironing, for a total of eight hours a week. They pay her the equivalent of US\$160 per month. Carla and Bruno also pay a gardener US\$40 a month to maintain their lawn every three weeks. Indeed, when I inquire from Carla if and how emigration would impact their standard of living, she says, with some interjections by Bruno,

Economically, I think our lives would be similar to what we have now. What I do believe would change significantly is the help, the logistics of help we currently count on [the housekeeping, cooking, ironing, and gardening]. Over there [in the U.S. or Canada], we wouldn't have the help we have here.

Skeptical of Carla's conclusion, Bruno interjects that when he lived in Canada and in the U.S., there, too, he had the opportunity to live well. He adds, "Although all we [referring to his first wife] could afford was a housekeeper who came once or twice a week."

Bruno is all too familiar with the cost of living in Canada and the U.S., where he lived from 1979 to 1993. He received his Ph.D. in thermal engineering from the University of Waterloo in Canada, and later had a post-doctoral fellowship in Canada's Department of Defense. Bruno returned to Mexico in 1994 and for the past 16 years has held a high-level engineering position with the federal government. It was in Mexico that he married Carla, who for 12 years ran her own silk textile business but which she recently closed in order to pursue a master's degree. Bruno has always harbored a desire to leave Mexico. Despite enjoying a "high" quality of life afforded by their material comforts, like many other Mexicans, Bruno and Carla are not exempt from the hazards of daily living in Mexico City, including, but not limited to, dangerous levels of air pollution and daily traffic congestion that some say adds two to three hours of travel time to their typical day. Bruno's daily work schedule and commute often prevent him from returning home before his son goes to bed for the evening.

Perhaps most difficult for many Mexicans, including Bruno and Carla, is the widespread insecurity and the high levels of crime in Mexico City. Indeed, Mexico's levels of kidnappings have shot up "from almost 600 in 2006 to more than 1 300 in 2011 [and] the number of homicides doubled in that period, to more than 27 000" (Velasco, 2013). During the time I was doing ethnographic research in Mexico City (2003-2005), I witnessed a tragic moment experienced by Bruno and his family, namely, the kidnapping of a close family friend. This friend was released months later, but not without needing prolonged hospitalization and paying a hefty ransom that was, in part, negotiated internationally.<sup>8</sup> This tragic experience was, for Bruno, Carla, and their extended family, a personal and painful reminder of the ways in which insecurity and crime has increasingly made living in Mexico City undesirable.

The last time Bruno seriously considered emigrating was in 2007, when he considered moving to the U.S. Carla, however, has not been altogether supportive of the idea of migrating in general and of going to the U.S. in particular. She stresses that if her family were to emigrate, Europe or Canada, in that order, would be their first choice as destinations.

<sup>8</sup> Important to note here is that the man who was kidnapped, upon his release, did not leave for the U.S.; this despite his financial wherewithal and despite the pleadings of his extended family, particularly his son, who resides in Texas.



Carla's explicit reluctance to emigrate, as well as her migration destination choices, warrants further exploration. We should question, for example, the extent to which Carla's unwillingness to emigrate checks Bruno's own desire—one might even say, his decision—to migrate to the U.S. in search of a safer and more secure environment and "better" job opportunities. Donato et al. (2010: 11) point out that Mexico's patriarchal family structure is such that migration decisions in Mexico tend to be male-centered and hence involve little or no input from women. As a result, migration is thus almost always male-led with women following later for purposes of family reunification. While this may be the general pattern among poor and working class Mexican migrants, we cannot assume that it is or would be similarly the case for skilled Mexican migrants. Indeed, education, economic status, and class-based dispositions play a significant role in conditioning individuals' migratory decisions such that, as in Bruno and Carla's case, it is important to consider how, for middle- and upper-class Mexican (potential) emigrants, keeping the family intact takes precedence over potentially better opportunities abroad. From the outset, then, family migration, rather than family reunification later, is—or would ideally be—the goal for such families.

Carla's explicit aversion to the idea of migrating to the U.S. and her preference for Europe and Canada also warrants further scrutiny. After all, while Bruno and Carla do not have relatives in either Europe or Canada, they do, in fact, have relatives who are spread out across and have been established for close to 50 years in the United States, particularly in Houston. These are relatives, moreover, with whom Bruno and Carla are close and with whom they are in regular contact via telephone. One would expect from the research on migrant social networks that the "intuitive" destination choice for Bruno and Carla would be the United States. Their strong feelings against such a choice, however, are illuminating. In fact, before I could even finish inquiring about the kind of support these relatives would or could offer them were they to migrate to the U.S., Bruno, without hesitation, interjects, "No! I wouldn't even consider it!" Carla agrees that asking for help with respect to what she calls "practical and operative matters" is out of the question.

Despite the fact that I notice discomfort in Bruno's demeanor and tone regarding seeking help from relatives, I proceed to inquire *why* they would be more inclined to seek the help of friends in Canada than their relatives in Houston with whom they have close ties. Bruno is silent for several seconds, somewhat irritated by my question, and then responds,

I don't know. I don't know. I guess because I imagine that they had their struggle [migrating/moving] in their time and they themselves did it all on their own. I had my own struggle

to get to Canada and I did it all on my own. When I went to the United States, I also managed all on my own. I just wouldn't ask for help. I wouldn't consider it. My cousins who live in the U.S., I mean, for all intents and purposes, they are Americans. I know they are very busy with their work. Perhaps, if we asked for help, it would be more about asking them for an *orientación*, that is, helping to orient us...If we were to ask for help, it would have more to do with things related to being in a new place, but that's as far as we would go.

To Bruno's explanation, Carla adds, "Yes, that's the kind of help we would ask for. But, we wouldn't depend on them for putting us in contact with a job or potential work." To appreciate Bruno and Carla's reluctance to call on relatives for help can be understood in the context of the entrenchment of those *middle-class* values—namely, self-direction, self-discipline, self-initiative, independence, and individualism—that Mexican professionals hold dear to their hearts. Such values—and an affront to them, we might imagine—militate against the acceptance and mobilization of the kinds of social support that have historically helped poor and working-class Mexicans migrate, settle, and succeed in the United States.

Both Bruno's reasons for wanting to leave and Carla's reasons for wanting to stay are varied and complicated. Bruno's reasons have little to do with job insecurity or poor wages. As I noted earlier, he earns approximately US\$170 000/year and has every assurance that he will continue to work at his current place of employment until retirement. Rather, his desire to leave Mexico has to do with his profound disillusionment with the slow pace of political and social change, widespread corruption, growing levels of violence and insecurity in Mexico, and, most importantly, his desire to provide their 10-year-old son with a better and brighter academic future. While Carla acknowledges Bruno's reasons for wanting to leave for the U.S., her own reservations have to do with wanting a guaranteed job for Bruno before leaving, as well as with her perceived lack of English fluency.

Perhaps more important, however, is her polite disdain for U.S. culture. This is less an anti-U.S.-American stance and more an affirmation of Mexican identity and culture, albeit in juxtaposition to U.S. culture. Thus, Carla extols Mexicans' respect for and attachment to family life, as opposed to the excessive individualism she believes exists among U.S. Americans.<sup>9</sup> To this, Lucia, a psychoanalyst who migrated

<sup>9</sup> Mexicans' distinctly "intense" attachment to family is further compounded by what Mariana (in a separate interview) notes is Mexicans' attachment to place. In a voice that mimicked someone from Monterrey, Nuevo León, and which evoked laughter from everyone in the group, Mariana blurted, "This is no joke. As if family attachments were not enough, Mexicans have just as strong an attachment to place. [By way of example] "¡Los pinches regiomontanos no pueden soportar vivir en el D.F. Luego, luego quieren regresar a su estado!" (The goddamn natives of Monterrey can't stand living in Mexico City. Right away, they want to return to their home state."

to Mexico from Columbia over a decade ago, adds, “the kind of lifestyle” that U.S. Americans live

is very strange to the Mexican....Americans work all day and don't see their family; they don't eat together. In Mexico it's different. Mexican families eat together every Sunday.

In addition to a strong attachment to family, my interviewees talked at length about what Bruno called Mexicans' focus on “transcendental” activities. He deploys this term by way of critiquing what Carla called U.S. Americans' being content to “kill time” and their engagement in superficial activities such as their obsession with sports and with renovating their cars and houses. Bruno continues,

[U.S. Americans] have little interest, little genuine interest, in what happens around the world. The average American doesn't seem either very conscious or very concerned with what is happening around them.

Carla chimes in:

What bothers me is that there is this pure selfishness in the general [U.S. American] population. Americans don't see anything beyond their bellybutton. Americans are not open to other cultures, which is very curious because the U.S. is a country whose wealth comes from the “openness” toward the immigrant, right?

Unlike Carla's polite disdain, other Mexican professionals whom I interviewed had harsh words for U.S. Americans and U.S. culture. Mariana, for instance, did not mince words when she noted that “Americans are uncultured (*incultos*), belligerent, and racists.” Julián, who is in his early 30s, has a bachelor's degree and has been working for close to a decade in a government ministry, reiterates this sentiment, saying, “¡Pinches gringos! Son bien incultos” (Goddamn gringos, they're so uncultured.). On this subject, Natalia, too, is quite vocal. Looking at me somewhat apologetically for what she is about to share, she recounts an experience she had as a fellow resident at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. She prefaces what she is about to say by stressing that she is the first to admit that all physicians everywhere are very myopic in their awareness of what is going on around them, politically and socially. And, she admits that in large part this has to do with the fact that they spend an inordinate amount of time becoming experts in their medical fields. Natalia then admits,

We [physicians] don't take time to read about other things, about a million other things that are going on around us. But, but, even with this level of closed-mindedness and lack of an expansive education, I can assure you that *we* [emphasis added] are very aware of the economic, political, and cultural situation not only in our own country, but also the situation in *your* [emphasis added, by which she means, the U.S.] country.

She continues with the point of her story, which is worth quoting here at length:

When I arrived to the Mayo Clinic, which as you know is top-notch, I met a Mexican physician who is now a very close friend of mine... This physician is a super doctor. She is well-known in her field for the kind of research she does... she has a Ph.D. and has been widely cited for her research on the arrhythmia gene. When I got to the Mayo Clinic everyone was talking about this friend of mine. It turns out that when my Mexican physician friend got to the Mayo Clinic, she was introduced to all the other big-name physician/researchers in her field. The American physicians asked my friend where she was from. She answered that she was from Mexico. In disbelief, the American physicians repeated her answer, "You're from Mexico? But how can *you* [emphasis added] be from Mexico, and moreover have a doctorate?" My friend wanted to say to all of those American big-name physicians, "You *pendejos* [idiots/assholes], it might benefit you to take a trip to Mexico, or get a magazine to educate yourselves. Not all of Mexico is comprised of people who didn't have a chance to get a formal education." Americans, I tell you, are so utterly uneducated and uncultured!

Having recounted this experience, Natalia offers the meaning of such an experience as *the* answer that should clearly spell out for me Mexican professionals' logic of immobility, and more specifically, their outright objections to leaving for the U.S. Rhetorically, she asks me,

So, why then would people like me, who have a job here, who, moreover, like what they are doing and for which they have spent so much of their lives studying and preparing, why would people like me go to the United States? "*¿Como por qué?*" (For what?) What would be the use? What, so that we can put up with all that discrimination and racism?

This indexes Mexican professionals' concerns with economic, cultural, and social —what Carla appropriately called *habitus*— differences between the U.S. and Mexico. These differences, however, are not necessarily construed by Mexican professionals as a threat to their "distinct" Mexican identity and culture. For, indeed, today, Mexican professionals do not see their Mexican-ness, to borrow from Morris

(1999: 377), as being “endangered by the food they eat, the clothes they wear, or where they keep their money.” Mexican professionals, to be sure, happily celebrate U.S. traditions (Black Friday and Halloween, for example), consume U.S. products, vacation in U.S. locations, and attend U.S. universities. In other words, adopting U.S. traditions and imitating U.S. consumption patterns, a matter Carla and others devoted sustained attention to during our interviews, does not, as Carla and others would agree, “make a person any more or less Mexican, or say anything about the nature of their national identity” (Morris 1999: 387). Moreover, imitating U.S. Americans’ consumption patterns does not preclude the intense distrust, resentment, and outright hostility some of those I interviewed harbor toward the United States and its citizens (Morris, 1999).<sup>10</sup> Such resentment may be understood in terms of asymmetries of power. More specifically, in terms of Mexican professionals’ experiences of humiliation and their keen sensitivity to U.S. perceptions—whether real or imagined—of Mexico’s and Mexicans’ inferiority (Morris, 1999: 371). As we will see in the next section, the humiliation and deprivation that Mexico has suffered historically at the hands of the *gringos* fuels Mexican professionals’ *bronca* (anger) with and disdain for U.S. Americans and their culture, and, moreover, provides the discursive rationale for their decision to “stay put.”

#### Rejecting the Status of the Mexican as Second-Class Citizen

¡Los mexicanos somos unos chingones, nuestra comida es una chingada,<sup>11</sup> y nuestra cultura es súper chingona, y por eso nadie se quiere ir! (We Mexicans are kick-ass; our food is kick-ass, and our culture is super-kick-ass; that’s why nobody wants to leave!) – Mariana, cardiac surgeon, Mexico City

During the group interview I conducted, cardiac surgeon Mariana proudly proclaimed this sentiment, partly in jest and partly out of frustration. It was, in effect, her plea to bring our group interview to an end after more than two hours of discussion and her realization that we were not getting closer to a “definitive” perspective espoused by Mexican professionals that would seem to explain why they choose to remain at home, rather than emigrate under difficult economic and (un)employment circumstances. Her statement explains why Mexicans, in Mariana’s view, do not emigrate. The noun *chingón*, from which the words *chingones*, *chingada*, and *chingona*

<sup>10</sup> In the literature, traditional views have tended to link [higher levels of] Latin American nationalism and anti-U.S.-American sentiment with the elite and intellectuals (Hollander, 1992: 356).

<sup>11</sup> The speaker actually said “nuestra comida es una chingada,” but the context suggests that she may have meant to say “una chingonería,” since the first expression is negative and the second is superlatively positive. And the latter is the meaning taken for the rough translation. [Translator’s Note.]

derive, is widely accepted as a vulgar term, albeit one that is widely used with varying connotations.<sup>12</sup> In the context in which Mariana uses the expletives, the meaning is unequivocal. Mexican professionals, according to Mariana, do not leave their country because Mexicans are the very best (*unos chingones*), because Mexican cuisine is out-of-this-world good (*una chingada* or *chingonería*), and because Mexican culture is qualitatively superior (*super chingona*). In response to Mariana's comment, Adrián adds, "and we're not just talking about food, but also about poetry and art." In contrast to Mexico's rich cultural heritage, the United States, according to Mariana, "has zero cultural history."

In the moment, Mariana's biting explanation provoked laughter from the group. Yet, her words, more than simply capturing national pride, underscore a more crucial point. Namely, that the intensity in the kind of national pride and cultural identity expressed in her comment must, at least in part, be understood as emanating from—if not in juxtaposition to—her outright rejection of *gringos'* characterization and treatment of Mexicans as second-class citizens. Indeed, such a juxtaposition is a recurring theme in the interviews I conducted. Adrián, for instance, who lived and studied for several years in the United States, related an experience he endured in the 1990s when he applied for a job there. With disdain in his voice, he noted,

When I was living in the state of Indiana, job applications I filled out asked me to mark my race and ethnicity. I remember this very clearly; I have it very clearly documented in my head. [He asks rhetorically] I thought that asking about race and ethnicity was illegal? The fact that employers inquire about one's race and ethnicity is unjust. I was asked if I was Caucasian, Hispanic...

Before he could finish his sentence, Mariana interjects, "I'm surprised they didn't ask if you were Amerindian!" At the mention of this, the whole group bursts into laughter at the seeming ridiculousness of the category "Hispanic." Taking the laughter as his cue to continue on the matter, Adrián stammered, "Hispanic! Hispanic! This is racist!" With emphasis and disdain, and drawing on his own personal recollection and experience, he imitates U.S. Americans' pronunciation of the word "Hispanic." *¡No, yo no soy Hissspanic! ¡Yo soy mexicano!* (No, I'm not Hispanic! I'm Mexican!). For Adrián, then, requiring Mexicans to disclose their race and ethnicity on job applications, and, moreover, categorizing them as "Hispanic," is outright racist and thus evidence of U.S. Americans' treatment of Mexicans as second-class citizens.

<sup>12</sup> The term "*chingar*" translates to "fuck"; it is especially and liberally employed by Mexican youth, regardless of their social class and/or educational level.

Important to note here, however, is not only Adrián's outright rejection of U.S. Americans' characterization of Mexicans as second-class citizens, but his going to great lengths to reverse the logic of their prejudice or racism. That is, he goes so far as to explicitly make evident that their racism against Mexicans is a result of their own inadequacies and defectiveness. Addressing a comment made by Natalia, the pediatric surgeon, who shares with the group that she is profoundly upset ("*A mí me molesta en extremo*") by how Mexicans are treated in the United States, Adrián interrupts her, and looking directly at me, begins:

Why do you judge or mistreat Mexicans when you yourselves have no more than a sixth-grade education! If you want to correct [a Mexican], okay, fine, but do it the right way. But, what moral authority do you have to correct someone else when you yourself don't even know how to read properly?

Adrián's use of "you" above refers to U.S. Americans more generally, although it is clear that he includes me in this category.<sup>13</sup> And, his posing of the hypothetical question, "Why do you judge or mistreat Mexicans when you yourselves have no more than a sixth-grade education?" is clearly meant to underscore what he perceives to be a moral incongruity. To cement this point, and again, to highlight U.S. Americans' own defectiveness, he provides another example in the context of our discussion of Mexican skilled migration to the U.S.:<sup>14</sup>

Really, do you think that if someone with a Ph.D. goes to the U.S., do you think they're going to get a job? I am not going to go wash dishes in the U.S. It's a question of dignity. At minimum, I can go teach a class. At minimum, I can teach *you* to read. Or, I can teach *you* math, which, I can assure you, Americans desperately need.

Further, drawing on his own experience while studying in the U.S. —indeed, assuring the group that he witnessed this "with this own eyes"—, Adrián avows that math departments at U.S. universities are overrun with foreign faculty, including Japanese, Chinese, and Indian professors. Thus, what Adrián insists on getting across is that U.S. Americans would not excel or be competitive on the world market were it not for "foreign faculty who are busy teaching math to American students."

<sup>13</sup> Throughout the interview, I had the uncomfortable feeling that in strategically using the term *you* instead of *Americans*, Adrián's was including me in the category "American" as distinctly (and explicitly) different from implicitly including me in the category "Mexican" (presumably because I emigrated from Mexico to the U.S. permanently).

<sup>14</sup> Again, note Adrián's use of the word "you" instead of "American" to implicate me as either an immigrant "sell-out" or as an ambassador of the U.S., so to speak.



Adrián's assertion that he can, at the very least, teach U.S. Americans to read or do math is to turn what he deems to be their racism on its head, and goes to the heart of the very humiliation that he himself and other Mexicans have suffered at the hands of *gringos*. Indeed, it is worthwhile questioning how much of the context of Mexican identity—that Mexicans are the very best (*unos chingones*), and that Mexican culture is qualitatively superior (*super chingona*)—is fashioned by a reversed logic and “juxtaposition to the humiliation, deprivation, and oppression suffered historically at the hands of the U.S.[providing] a common foundation that strengthens the sense of [Mexican] national identity and imbues it with a shared sense of distrust toward the U.S.” (Morris, 1999: 371). In the context of Morris's (1999) observation then, Natalia's logic of (im)mobility—specifically, that she has no desire to immigrate to the U.S.—must be understood as a means by which she discursively and symbolically exacts justice on behalf of her lower-class compatriots and migrants who have been mistreated in the U.S. Natalia self-consciously reflects,

I think there's this history, this cultural history that we Mexicans have with the U.S. I think there's this “*recelo*,” this particular distrust and suspicion [of the U.S.]. And in fact, I think that [Mexican] people with a certain level of education and culture are [less likely to go live to the U.S.]. Perhaps I represent that extreme. I go to the U.S. to have fun and to study. I go there to vacation. But, I have no desire to live there. It's this feeling like I want to do justice to my compatriots who have experienced racism and prejudice in the U.S.

As Natalia shared her views, Adrián and others in the group nodded their heads in support and vocalized their agreement. To paraphrase from what Adrián so eloquently shared with the group, the *recelo* of which Natalia speaks must be understood in the larger context of the history of Mexico/U.S. relations. More specifically, in terms of what Mexicans deem to be the United States' long-standing pretensions about intellectual and moral superiority (which Natalia so forcefully sought to debunk when she shared her Mayo Clinic experience), its imposition of political and economic domination, its belligerence, and its history and practice of exploitation. This is a history, Adrián notes, that goes back to the heyday of U.S. imperialism in Mexico, and which, for all intents and purposes, continues today. In his estimation, the same “sentiment of natural aversion” Mexicans have toward the Spaniard—the colonizer—<sup>15</sup> exists toward the U.S. American. He continues, “So what happens

<sup>15</sup> Adrián has long been employed by Bancomer, a Spanish bank in Mexico. He and his partner, also employed by Bancomer, share with the rest of the group their resentment of the fact that all the top positions at the bank are held by Spaniards, and more generally dislike the fact that so many Spaniards have immigrated to Mexico as a result of the economic recession in Spain. As far as Adrián is concerned, “There is no

then is that we have all this hate reserved...Someone tells you about...the *gringos*, and the Mexican is willing to go to war, so to speak." Indeed, for Adrián and the other Mexican professionals whose narratives are presented here, this "being at" or "going to war" with the *gringos* is part and parcel of their logic of (im)mobility, more specifically, of their decision, at least discursively, not to migrate to the United States.

## CONCLUSION

"Is there any reluctance on the part of Mexican professionals to migrate to the United States?" Alarcón (2007: 246) posed this question in an essay on skilled migrants in North America, and he himself responded that scant research on the migration of skilled Mexicans makes this question difficult to answer. I believe the data I have presented here provides some answers, which suggest a more complicated picture than extant accounts of the (im)mobility of Mexican professionals. Social network theory may provide a robust accounting that explains the significant numbers of highly skilled Peruvian migrants to the United States. However, the supposed absence of social networks for Mexican professionals does little to further our understanding of skilled migration from Mexico. On the one hand, it undermines the ways in which individuals' class-based dispositions, cultural beliefs, and social practices intimately inform their logic of (im)mobility. And, on the other hand, it ignores the socio-historical specificities of U.S./Mexico migration and relations. Indeed, Mexican professionals' deeply held beliefs about the United States' belligerence, its imposition of political and economic domination, and its history and practice of exploitation intimately inform their "staying-put" decision-making processes. A sociocultural framework, then, one that is particularly attuned to individuals' own discursive renderings, is important if we are to understand how decisions to migrate and *not* to migrate are framed and reframed, indeed, are rooted, in migrants' and non-migrants' own meaning-making and experiences. The data presented here underscores the importance of and the need for ethnographic research on the phenomenology of skilled migration from Mexico.

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doubt that they [Spaniards] took a lot of our wealth, a lot of gold, and a lot of silver. And today, many Spanish families continue to come to Mexico [to take away the wealth]."

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## APPENDIX-OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Note:** Below is a sample of questions I asked during interviews. Questions below were posed in no particular order, and asked only when relevant. What appears in parentheses is my translation.

### **SECCIÓN 5: ACTITUDES GENERALES SOBRE EMIGRACIÓN Y LA SOCIEDAD ESTADOUNIDENSE** (Section 5: General Attitudes Regarding Emigration and U.S. American Society)

**¿Qué me puede decir usted sobre la situación de empleo o de desempleo en la Ciudad de México?**

(What can you tell me about [un]employment in Mexico City?)

**¿Cómo han manejado los profesionistas el desempleo?**

(How have Mexican professionals handled unemployment?)

**¿Ha estado usted desempleado/o (por razones que no fueron de su propia voluntad)?**

(Have you ever been unemployed [for reasons that were not of your own volition]?)

**¿Cómo ha manejado el desempleo/subempleo?**

(How have you handled being unemployed/underemployed?)

**¿Alguna vez ha vivido fuera de México?, ¿cuándo?, ¿por qué motivo?**

(Have you ever lived outside Mexico? When? Why?)

**¿Alguna vez ha considerado emigrar [fuera de México]?, ¿adónde?**

(Have you ever considered emigrating to a place outside of Mexico? Where?)

**¿Bajo qué circunstancias emigraría?**

(Under what circumstances would you emigrate?)

**Si usted emigrara, ¿se iría solo/a o con su familia?**

(If you emigrated, would you go alone or with your family?)

**En orden de preferencia, a qué países emigraría? Explique su respuesta.**

(In order of preference, what countries would you /be willing to emigrate to? Explain your answer.)

**¿Alguna vez consideraría emigrar sin los documentos requeridos? Es decir, ¿emigraría ilegalmente (como indocumentado/a)?**

(Would you ever consider emigrating without the required documents? In other words, would you consider emigrating irregularly?)

**¿Tiene familia en Estado Unidos?, ¿por qué se fueron?, ¿cómo les ha ido a sus familiares en Estados Unidos?**

(Do you have family in the United States? Why did they leave [Mexico]? How has your family fared in the United States?)

**¿Cuándo fue la última vez que estuvo en contacto con ellos (sus familiares en Estados Unidos)?**

(When was the last time you were in contact with your family residing in the United States?)

**Si tuviera alguna necesidad, ¿se sentiría cómodo/a en pedirles ayuda de algún tipo [a sus familiares en Estados Unidos]?**

(If you were in any kind of need, would you feel comfortable asking your family who resides in the U.S. for help of any kind?)

**¿Qué opina sobre la sociedad estadounidense?, ¿sobre los estadounidenses?**

(What is your opinion of the United States? About U.S. Americans?)

**En qué aspectos más importantes piensa que Estados Unidos y México son diferentes (similares)? ¿Piensa que las dos sociedades tienen valores y principios similares o diferentes?**

(In what important aspects do you think the United States and Mexico differ? How are they similar? Do you think that the two societies have similar/different values and principles?)

**¿Qué opina sobre la relación política, económica, cultural o social entre México y Estados Unidos?**

(What is your opinion of the relationship—whether political, economic, cultural and/or social—between Mexico and the United States?)

**¿Qué opina sobre cómo se trata a los migrantes mexicanos en Estados Unidos?**

(What is your opinion of how Mexican migrants are treated in the U.S.?)

**Imagine que tuviera que emigrar a Estados Unidos, ¿qué tan diferente sería su vida (cotidiana y a largo plazo) en comparación con cómo vive hoy en México?**

(Imagine you had to migrate to the United States. Compared to how you live your life currently in Mexico, how different, and in which ways, do you think your life would be day-to-day and long-term in the United States?)