

Immigration and the Politics of Skill

Forthcoming, In Gordon L. Clark, Maryann Feldman, Meric Gertler and Dariusz Wójcik (eds).
The New Oxford Handbook on Economic Geography, Oxford University Press.

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Abstract

Skill has played a central role in immigration scholarship, most notably in a protracted debate over whether “unskilled” immigrants threaten job security for less or moderately educated native-born workers. In recent years, a new and important twist has been added to this debate that questions the logic that immigrant workers, particularly those with limited formal education, are unskilled. Extending this further, we argue in this chapter that immigrants are not simply individuals that possess, acquire, and apply their skill. They are also contributors to collective learning processes through which industry skills are developed, replenished, and recombined overtime. But immigrants are especially vulnerable to skill misclassification because they lack access to institutions that can protect and defend spaces for, and contributions to, collective learning. Focusing on immigrant skill reproduction in the absence of institutional protections allows us to reflect on the role those institutions play in shaping and reshaping the politics of skill—a role that can be strengthened as part of a growing movement in support of low-wage workers more generally.

1. Introduction

Skill has played a central role in immigration scholarship, most notably in a protracted debate over whether “unskilled” immigrants threaten job security for less or moderately educated native-born workers. That is, are immigrants to blame for job losses experienced by their unskilled native counterparts? Economists especially have kept this discussion alive over several decades, introducing new and innovative methodological techniques to study the effects of immigration on native worker job displacement and wage compression in Europe and the United States. Through their careful analysis, they have tipped the debate in favor of immigrants, indicating they create minimal labor market disruption and even complement the domestic workforce.

In recent years, a new and important twist has been added to this debate that questions the logic that immigrant workers, particularly those with limited formal education, are unskilled. Recent research, including our own, has helped to reveal the skills of less educated immigrant workers, including transferable knowledge and expertise developed initially through work experience in communities of origin (Lowe et al 2010; Iskander and Lowe 2010; Iskander and Lowe 2013; Hagan et al. 2015). Revealing sources of “hidden” skill allows immigration scholars and advocates to ask the ever important question of why immigrant skills go unrecognized and justifies claims that immigrant workers deserve greater recognition and reward for their skill contribution, which includes extending legal protections that are granted on the basis of that skill.

Still, while reclassifying less educated immigrants as skilled is a useful starting place, in isolation it misses a related contribution that immigrant workers make to skill development processes. Immigrants are not simply individuals that possess, acquire, and apply their skill.

They are also contributors to collective learning processes through which industry skills are developed, replenished, and recombined overtime. What is defined as individual skill is actually a time-stamped artifact of on-going, collective, often tacit learning processes—a byproduct that might be easier to measure in time and place and by using individual-level proxies, but ultimately needs to be contextualized in social relations of work in order to fully understand why and when skill changes and how and under what conditions those changes benefit and gain recognition from employers. While methodologically more challenging, making this connection opens opportunities for immigration and labor scholarship.

Less educated immigrants are not the only ones that suffer skills misclassification. Many workers that toil in low-wage, high-turnover labor markets, including native-born workers, are undervalued and underpaid for skill development and training services they provide to the businesses and industries that employ them. Like immigrants, they too carry a disproportionate share of the cost and risk associated with industry training and upskilling, thus calling into question traditional economic models of human capital which presume low wages are paid to workers because they are low-skilled or as a means to offset investments in training by employers. Beyond an example of labor market failure, this disconnect presents an opportunity to explore the underlying political and institutional factors that obscure worker contributions to skill development and make it especially difficult for workers in low-wage segments of the labor market to leverage their collective contribution for economic gain.

If this skills oversight affects non-immigrant workers as well, why should we focus much of this chapter on less educated immigrant workers as a special skills case? Immigrants are especially vulnerable to skill misclassification because they lack access to institutions that can protect and defend spaces for, and contributions to, collective learning. Focusing on immigrant

contribution to industry skill reproduction in the absence of institutional protections allows us to reflect on the role those institutions play in shaping and reshaping the politics of skill. As we will illustrate below, those institutions—most notably labor unions—are rarely the initiators or essential sources of industry knowledge and skill. This is not to say they play no role in training and skill development, but rather their primary role has been that of skill protector—helping groups of workers reveal their collective contribution to industry skill building processes and using that to initiate collective bargaining for higher wages and improved working conditions.

Starting from this institutional vantage point enables us not only to think critically about why protective institutions might matter for skill development and for whom, but also to interrogate which institutional forms best support worker efforts to reveal their ongoing contribution to industry upskilling. This query has implications for immigration advocacy, but equally suggests a new direction for the growing movement in support of low-wage workers more generally—that is to say, a redirection that would call for increased wages in light of evidence of worker-initiated skill contributions, rather than presuming skill is initially absent *without* these wage gains.

In this chapter, we expand this discussion and provide an illustrative example from our empirical study of Latino immigrant construction workers in two new destination cities. The construction industry has long provided an empirical arena for debate about the value of worker skill and the institutional safeguards necessary to defend it. Thanks in large part to mobilization by organized labor, construction work was once appraised as highly skilled. Now, however, as construction has experienced an influx of new immigrant workers, jobs in this industry have been recast as low-skill and low-wage. While industry experts themselves push back against this reclassification, the narrative linking skill decline to Latino immigrant incorporation in

construction prevails in popular media accounts, immigration policy discourse, and even academic scholarship (Borjas 2003; Cortes 2008). This revised view of construction work has taken hold even though the industry has experienced no technological shifts and the skill base required to complete construction tasks has remained fundamentally unchanged. The construction industry therefore offers as a poignant illustration of skill misclassification, and we use it as a staging ground to reflect on what is at stake for both equity and innovation if contributions to industry skill by low-waged workers remain undervalued.

2. Skill as both means and ends

For many economists, the relationship between skill development and wages is easily explained and predicted. To economists, wages are signifiers of individual skill and reflect skill specificity. The more specific a set of skills to a company or task, the more investment an employer is willing to make in training individual workers in that skill. But given their investment, the employer will also be less willing to pay that worker a higher wage. Equally, the specificity of that skill makes it more difficult for individual workers to move to another company on the basis of that skill and as such that skill is less valued on the open market and commands a significantly lower price. In contrast, general skills—which is to say skills that are valued widely and not specific to any one company—are more portable and often receive higher wages on the open market. They also tend to be developed through formal education programs and through investments in higher education that are made by individual workers and job seekers, rather than the employer. By extension, a worker that is more highly educated can expect higher wages, both justifying and offsetting their educational investment. Employers, for their part, are often willing to pay a higher premium, or “efficiency” wage, to keep more educated workers from leaving. In

the eyes of economists, wage differences help to signal to a worker which general skill sets are more valued and thus guide them towards the right external educational and training supports.

Of course, economists have extended their work beyond this stylized framework, at times considering how market frictions—including those introduced by labor market institutions—shift individual incentives (i.e. wage returns) to invest time and resources in education and training (Acemoglu and Pischke 1998). Still, what most studies in the human capital tradition share is a view that skill is an easy-to-measure, individual attribute, whose responsibility it is to develop is determined primarily by its relative transferability.

A rich body of scholarship has raised important challenges about economists' oversimplified categorization of skill (see Paul Attewell's thorough review 1990). For our purposes, an especially problematic feature of the human capital approach is the limited attention given to how skill is developed and through what processes and social interactions. Viewed through a human capital lens, the skill development process remains an unexplored blackbox, thereby reinforcing a focus on the ends—in this case an "individual's fund of knowledge and skill," (Attewell 1990:425) measured by years of education or work experience—rather than the means to reaching these ends. By failing to unpack processes of skill development, we risk missing the way that skill is socially and institutionally produced, which in turn, can affect the value that employers (and others) assign it.

Perhaps the most stalwart critiques of human capital conceptions are grounded empirical observations of skill and its reproduction. Authored by sociologists primarily in the 1970s and 1980s, scholarship in this vein has looked at how work is organized and carried out on the factory floor or in specific industry settings, and has focused on the implications of the labor

processes for the way that skill is understood and developed (Doeringer and Piore 1971; Braveman 1976; Burawoy 1979; Juravich 1985). These workplace ethnographies have paid attention to the way that the relations between workers and management inform what is valued as skill (Lee, 1981). They have revealed how worksite interactions shape worker access to training opportunities that are organizationally sanctioned, but also support worker-initiated processes of learning that are informal, unplanned, and often transgressive (Juravich, 1985). These accounts have also called into question the easy binary between general and specific skills advanced by economists, often noting the fluid and contested quality of most skill. Furthermore, they have shown that skill may not in fact be the property of any individual worker (or employer for that matter) but rather is most accurately understood as a collective achievement, held in the workplace interactions through which it is enacted and cultivated (Van Maanen and Barley 1982; Scribner 1984; Lave 1988; Cobble 1991) (Van Maanen and Barley, 1982, Scribner, 1984, Lave, 1988, Cobble, 1991).

The construction industry has long offered a rich terrain through which the collective development of skill has been documented, even prior to immigrant incorporation. As labor process ethnographers have noted, the skill of construction workers is critical to industry performance and consequently, has been a central industry concern: the construction process is inherently unpredictable, and production depends on workers with the expertise to adapt to new conditions and to resolve the unique challenges that emerge on the construction site (Reimer, 1979). Each building structure reflects a particular design, and is fixed to an exact physical location with idiosyncratic characteristics that inform how the building process unfolds. Moreover, construction crews contend with factors such as the vagaries of weather, the site-specific sequencing of construction tasks and coordination with other trades, and differences in

the qualities of materials. Construction tasks also involve working conditions that can be hazardous, such as work that occurs at heights or working with hand-held pneumatic tools, and where safety outcomes are dependent on the construction abilities (Iskander and Lowe 2010). Given these conditions, the industry depends on skill that is deep enough so that workers can also resolve the specific problems that they may confront as they complete their work (Silver 1986; Applebaum 1999).

Given the centrality of construction expertise to day-to-day production, how do industry actors perceive and identify skill? The workers, supervisors, and contractors queried by labor ethnographers about definitions of skill concur that a good craftsman is an experienced worker (Reimer 1979; Steiger 1993). The industry equation of skill with experience combines an attention to learning and skill; and because it blends a concern with the means through which skill was learned with the technical competence that is its end, it stands in sharp contrast to human capital model of skill that focuses too narrowly on the outcome.

Ethnographies of skill development in construction have considered both union and non-union settings, and find that despite the institutional difference, the social practices that foster learning are remarkably consistent. Across institutional context, novices learn through cumulative experience under the loose tutelage of more seasoned workers (Applebaum 1981; Emmitt 2006). This informal teaching system, seemingly casual and unstructured, is described as deceptively complex and sophisticated, built around an array of teaching modalities (Graves 1958; Steiger 1993; Worthen and Berchman 2010). Guided demonstration emerges as a core pedagogical practice: in this teaching approach, an experienced worker brackets the flow of construction work and slows down the execution of a task to reveal to the less experienced worker the component movements and logic required to complete it, sometimes accompanying

this demonstration with a verbal explanation. During slack times on a construction site, or even off-site during non-work times, novices engage in supervised experimentation of those same tasks, with experienced workers providing active coaching or critique of these assays. More experienced workers also provide mentorship in problem-solving. In Socratic form, they lay out the building challenge to be addressed and solicit ideas from the novice for how to resolve it. Just as often, the experienced worker creates a problem to be solved by misdirecting a worker—asking for the wrong tool for example— or by giving incomplete instructions— ordering a worker to carry over lumber or piping but without specifying where the material should be brought. Storytelling is another pedagogical tactic detailed by labor ethnographers (Graves 1958; Worthen and Berchman 2010). Journeymen share “war stories” to convey ways to cope with technical difficulties on the construction site, trouble with faulty equipment for example, but also to model strategies to resist management attempts to undermine worker autonomy (Reimer 1979; Applebaum 1999).

A motivating puzzle for construction studies—and for other industry studies as well—has been how these intricate social systems for learning are reproduced when management plays only a minimal training role. Here industry ethnographies help draw attention to the larger social systems that tether construction worker identity to their participation in social processes of teaching and learning. This occupational identity is often overlaid onto broader ethnic or neighborhoods communities; family ties and ethnic affiliation have historically offered privileged access to construction jobs and to the union (Silver 1986; Finkel 1997). A tradition of workers following fathers and grandfathers into the building trades has made norms of mutual obligation around training novices compelling: a journeyman who trained someone else’s kin likely did so with the understanding that others would train his own son or nephew (Applebaum,

1999). But while workers have tended to gain access to the industry through social networks, their ongoing participation depends on their adherence to the occupational culture in the industry, and especially on their deference to “craft” mastery and experience on the job site. “Horseplay” or “hazing” of novices is used on site to enforce the status associated with experience and to enact an occupational hierarchy based on skill. In this context, learning is not merely or even primarily about the acquisition of technical expertise; it is an induction into a way of life (Applebaum 1981; Lave and Wenger 1991; Worthen and Berchman 2010).

For most of the 20th century, building trade unions were the most vocal and powerful representatives of this occupational community, and they used skill to defend the position of their members (Palladino, 2005). Unions asserted that the craft expertise of their members justified the higher wages and preferential hiring they demanded (Finkel, 1997). They lobbied hard to maintain craft standards in the industry, despite contractor and, occasionally, government efforts to reduce industry skill requirements, either to reduce labor costs or increase employment. Unions pledged to guarantee skill, and by implication, the production quality it supported. To that end, they vouched for the competence of union journeymen and instituted an apprenticeship system to train new workers.

However, ethnographies of skill development have revealed that unions were less involved in skill development than they claimed publicly. Instead, unions provided institutional cover for the informal social system through which skill was created and reproduced in the industry. They protected social learning processes to which they were largely superfluous. Even in unionized segments of the construction labor force, hiring and training decisions were made informally, often outside the purview of the building trades. As Applebaum, in his monograph on unionized construction, reports, workers were recruited for jobs through personal connections,

not through union hiring halls: “It is not unusual for a super or foreman, address book in hand, to drive around at night or on the weekend, contacting workers in the homes, trying to round up crews for a job[...] The hiring hall is mainly for men either not well-known or not competent” (1981: 26).

Similarly, studies of the industry observe that only a minority of tradesmen entered the industry through formal, union-managed apprenticeships. Most learned their trade on the periphery of this formal training system, many acquiring foundational knowledge from friends or relatives on smaller side-projects (Silver 1986: 111). They entered the union after showing proof of qualification by passing a trade test or clearing other forms of evaluation administered by their local. Through their push for higher wages and employer contribution training programs (under the Taft-Hartley act), unions pressed employers to compensate workers for the social system through which the skill for their industry was developed. In an industry where demand was variable and workers faced long and unpredictable stretches of unemployment, unions compelled employers to share in the costs of training industry newcomers and upskilling incumbents, such that when production resumed after a hiatus, employers had a replenished skill pool on which to draw.

In the 1970s, building trade unions came under concerted attack from contractors and the Ford administration, and faced a decline in membership, which would drop from a little less than 50% of the labor force in the 1970s to about 15% when it finally plateaued in the 2000s (Palladino, 2005). As they confronted this crisis, which would only become more acute under the Reagan administration, they pushed to further formalize the apprenticeship system and make their contribution to skill development a more tangible source of leverage. Unions systematized their program of instruction: they added new rubrics for assessment, bolstered classroom

instruction, and, in many cases, expanded classroom hours and forged collaborations with community colleges for degree-granting programs (Weil, 2005).

But, in making the training provided under the union umbrella more visible, unions ultimately obscured and supplanted the casual social exchanges through which most industry learning occurred. Once the unions drew an institutional boundary that divided learning from work, separating out pedagogical transfers from informal social interactions, employers could point to the training offered by unions, now clearly defined, and claim that employers too could provide such upskilling (Erllich and Grabelsky, 2005). In the 1970s and 80s, contractor associations expanded their training programs, offering mostly short-term, specialized, and modular courses (Northrup and Northrup, 1984). These did not replicate the robust social system of on-the-job learning, but because unions, in their push to ring fence and claim training, had removed the notion of occupational community from negotiations over skill, they were unable to invoke the value of informal learning to counter contractor encroachment. Paradoxically, by establishing an institutional proxy for social processes of learning while failing to provide an institutional shield for the processes themselves, unions implicitly advanced a definition of skill as individual attribute, and forsook the rich social system of learning that had offered the empirical basis for rebuttals to human capital notions of skill to begin with.

3. Learning processes among Latino workers in construction

The gap between the interactive social system for skill development and the institutionalized structures that represent training raises questions about learning processes in construction labor markets today. In the 2000s, construction labor markets experienced a sharp increase of Latino

immigrant workers, with the proportion they represent more than doubling from 11% in 2003 to 24% in 2012 (Kochhar 2008; National Center of La Raza 2013). In cities in the south and west of the United States, they make up more than two-thirds of the labor pool. The majority of Latino immigrants in construction are employed in the residential segment of the industry, but many also work on commercial and infrastructure projects. Despite the proportion of the industry labor market they now represent, these immigrants have widely been portrayed as unskilled, and have been blamed for undercutting wages and turning construction work into a low-wage occupation (Erllich and Grabelsky, 2005). In addition to the anti-immigrant rhetoric underlying this claim, it suggests that an industry that has depended on the expertise of workers to function had, in the short span of a decade, had somehow become devoid of skill.

This unsettling assertion could only be accurate if the longstanding equivalence in the industry between skill and experience had suddenly been broken, and that learning supported through social processes on the job no longer produced competence. Only then would it make sense to assert that workers who had no access to training that was institutionally recognized also had no skill. To interrogate the basis for claims that this new Latino immigrant workforce in construction was unskilled, we conducted an empirical study in two new destination labor markets: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where industry training and credentialing processes are tightly controlled by labor unions but closed to immigrant workers; and Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, a region in a “right-to-work” state where union density is extremely low and, therefore, there are fewer institutional obstacles to immigrant participation in mainstream construction markets. Still, formal construction training and apprenticeship programs are sparse in North Carolina and, when they exist, provide limited access for immigrant workers.

Drawing on over 200 interviews across both sites over five years (2007-2011), we

explored how skills that immigrants had developed, often before immigrating, informed their participation in construction labor markets (Iskander and Lowe, 2010). Contrary to the prevailing representation of Latino construction workers as unskilled, we found that over half of the immigrant workers we interviewed had acquired significant construction experience before immigrating to the United States. Moreover, they used their competence as a base from which to continue to develop their skill in U.S. labor markets, adapting their knowledge to localized construction techniques and deepening their expertise in one or multiple building trades. They also developed collective learning processes, elaborating learning strategies that consolidated their foothold in the labor market and enabled them to create pathways for occupational advancement.

The organization of construction on project sites that employed immigrant workers differed in our two research locations: in Philadelphia, immigrants worked in small teams that completed the range of tasks involved in residential construction and rehabilitation with minimal supervision, whereas in Raleigh-Durham, immigrants worked on large, hierarchically organized construction sites where crews were assigned specialized construction tasks. Despite these differences, the collective learning processes we observed in each city were more alike than they were different, and they also displayed remarkable continuity with those reported in earlier labor ethnographies of the construction industry.

Immigrants in both sites relied heavily on guided demonstration, and workers with more experience in the U.S. showed their co-workers how to execute building techniques and use unfamiliar construction tools (Iskander and Lowe 2013). This teaching method was supported with supervised experimentation. In Philadelphia, workers practiced building skills on the job site, relying on team members for help and correction, and in Raleigh-Durham, where workers

experienced more intensive and rigid supervision, they experimented instead on small side-projects with more experienced workers instructing novices. Workers also provided one another with mentorship in problem-solving. Still, unlike most US workers who learned new skills through mentorship, the primary challenge for the immigrant workers in our study was how to translate the skill they brought with them to their new construction contexts, so that they might apply the full extent of their technical expertise to the construction problems they confronted on the job site. In both cities, workers used stories to share knowledge about how to deal with difficulties they encounter on the job: how to handle supervision, how to avoid injury, and how to resist exploitative practices.

They also cultivated a set of norms—or workplace customs—that governed learning on the jobsite and established skill as shared resource. In a telling echo of the occupational culture described in earlier accounts, deference to craft mastery emerged as a constitutive value of the learning practices in both cities. “The most important thing for learning and teaching on the job is respect [...] respect for each other and for your *compadres* who have worked in construction for a long time,” explained Rafael from Philadelphia. Their view of skill reasserted the equation of skill with experience that had historically been at the core of definition of competence in industry. The immigrants in our study also merged the means and ends of skill development: For them, the means of acquiring skill was to become part of an occupational community and to participate the social process of learning that characterized it. “It’s all relationships,” added Rafael, “You treat your co-workers with respect, with solidarity. It is your friends who teach you...”

In the institutions that governed the construction industry in both cities, Latino immigrants found little protection for the learning processes that were at the heart of their

occupational community. There were no formal structures that they could draw on to defend training system they had fostered. In response, immigrants in our study cobbled together a kind of institutional cover to safeguard and assign value to the social exchanges through which they developed their competence, rather than to the skill that was its outcome. In their approach, they focused on the means rather than the ends. In this respect, their strategies resembled those adopted by unions before they found themselves in crisis and responded by elevated the visibility of their apprenticeship programs in order to make their training contributions explicit (Iskander and Lowe 2013; Iskander *et al.* 2010; Lowe *et al.* 2010).

In both cities, immigrants drew on the organization of production on jobsites to defend and expand their social systems of learning. In Philadelphia, for example, where immigrants worked in loosely supervised teams, they pushed for collective pay increases and quality bonuses. In this way, they safeguarded the cohesion of their work group from employer attempts to create divisions by paying workers differently. They protected the least skilled among them, giving them time to learn as they preempted any employer attempts to winnow out the novices or to pit workers on the team against one another as a strategy to drive down wages. In Raleigh-Durham, where the organization of work was hierarchical and highly specialized, immigrant workers replicated certain dominant practices in order to initially shield more transgressive practices of skill development. In several instances, highly ranked immigrant workers used their labor market status to promote learning practices in the crews they were assigned to supervise. Aware of expertise within their crews, yet also mindful of the need to support learning among newcomers, these immigrant supervisors took steps to relax job categories and flatten job ladders, thereby encouraging members of their work crew to engage in cross-task training and job rotation (Iskander and Lowe, 2013).

Latino immigrants in both cities also used broader institutional structures as a resource to open up additional spaces for learning. Government regulations and safety rules comprised one institutional area that immigrants drew on. In Philadelphia, immigrant workers used government license inspections of building permits opportunistically to query city officials about scaffolding techniques and learn about the structural organization of the historic row houses they were remodeling. In Raleigh-Durham, immigrant workers used state-mandated on-site safety training as an arena to explore how to repurpose previous skills for local construction and to acquire new ones: safety training videos were used as a pedagogical break in which workers could collectively reflect on building techniques, and safety monitoring was transformed into a vehicle for mentoring around skill and team-building (Lowe and Iskander 2015).

Efforts like these demonstrate the value that workers place on collective learning processes as a means for occupational advancement but also as a cultural norm of an occupational community. They also display the resourcefulness and ingenuity of workers as they draw on workplace practice and institutional structure to create proto-institutions to protect social processes. A subset of the immigrant workers in our study were even able to achieve some improvement in job quality, including increased worker prestige, more secure and predictable hours, and even small increases in compensation. But ultimately, with no institutional mechanism to compel employers to compensate them for their industry skill contribution, their jobs often remain low-wage and their employment insecure.

Immigrant workers in non-construction industries also struggle to advance their labor market position on the basis of their contribution to collective learning processes. Rich ethnographies by Roger Waldinger, Leslie Salzinger, Travis Du Bry, Manuel Adrián Hernández Romero, Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, and Miriam Wells, among others, provide hints of this struggle

through their detailed accounts of immigrant workers in agriculture, housekeeping, apparel, janitorial services, and hospitality. Admittedly, learning and skill development were not their primary research concern, and so these descriptions of immigrant-authored learning processes are less detailed and drawn out. However, similar to what we uncover for construction, their depictions offer evidence that group learning practices of immigrant workers contribute to a shared sense of pride in the work, and also make it difficult to assign attribution for quality performance to any one individual within the group (Zolniski 1993; Newman 2009). We flag these implicit references to collective learning as an opportunity for coordinating worker advocacy in multiple industries where low-wage work has become the new norm. Combining our research in construction with related ethnographies of work creates an opening for organizing efforts in the name of social and economic justice to be more inclusive of these learning processes, especially when making demands for higher wages and stronger institutional protection at the bottom of the labor market. It is this connection to which we next turn our attention.

4. The Low-Wage Turn: Bringing Collective Learning Back In

Immigrant advocates increasingly situate demands for improved working conditions and wages within a larger critique of low-wage work generally. The focus on the low-wage economy has intensified in recent years and has gained considerable traction given national policy concern over income inequality in the wake of the Great Recession. Tethering the immigrant experience to that facing all low-wage workers, regardless of national origin, is both necessary and strategic. It is impossible to study the low-wage economy without recognizing the sizeable share of

immigrant workers within many low-wage industries and labor markets. Politically too, the low-wage umbrella provides a helpful buffer against anti-immigrant rhetoric and backlash, ultimately shifting the focus to questions of moral economy, rather than citizenship. But while this close coupling has helped to bring much needed research attention to the plight of immigrant workers, this low-wage turn—at least in its current iteration—has pushed important insights about worker contributions to skill and learning into the shadows. As research on low-wage jobs progresses, so too must our understanding of workplace practices and learning processes that low-wage workers contribute to and collectively inform.

Existing studies of low-wage work help catalog many features of low-wage jobs that make them demeaning and unrewarding for workers (Appelbaum *et al.* 2003b; Bernhardt *et al.* 2008; Doussard, 2008). To be sure, the defining characteristic of these jobs is inadequate compensation, but scholars also point out that low wages are accompanied by a compendium of other traits that undercut job quality. These include managerial practices that are degrading and exploitative, restrictions on worker autonomy and decision-making, and stratagems to siphon off some portion of worker earnings, either through overt forms of wage theft or pernicious employment practices that drive down compensation (Milkman 2010; Kalleberg 2011). Moreover, low wages are often correlated with employer tactics to exert direct control over workers both on and off the jobsite: scheduling practices that prevent workers from holding additional jobs or managing non-work obligations, employer codes specifying appropriate social behavior, and other obstacles to career advancement (Peck and Theodore 2001; Standing 2011; Weil 2014).

Much of this scholarship has attributed the rise of low-quality, low-wage jobs to a wholesale gutting of protective employment institutions. The macro-institutional shifts since the

late 1970s include not only deindustrialization and subsequent growth in low-end service jobs, but also deunionization and weakened labor laws that make it harder for workers to defend themselves against employer abuse (Appelbaum *et al.* 2003a; Bernhardt *et al.* 2008). Scholars have also considered micro-institutional changes, most notably transformations in the organization of work and related normative shifts that affect how employers treat and value their workforce. They have documented the steady rise in contingent work arrangements, including labor subcontracting, that not only create considerable distance between workers and the final beneficiaries of their effort, but more importantly, make it harder to identify which companies and employers should be implicated for unsafe, unjust, and at times deadly, working conditions (Bernhardt *et al.* 2003; Kalleberg 2011; Weil 2014).

A sub-stream of scholarship unpacks industry-specific reconfigurations in order to explore why some groups of workers within an industry or organizational setting might experience these changes differently—for example, why flexible employment practices might lead to greater worker empowerment in some organizational environments or occupational categories but not in others (Bailey and Bernhardt 1996; Batt *et al.* 2003). In highlighting “varieties” of employment practices, this scholarship helps recast low-wage work as the product of actions taken by employers when institutional protections are absent, and suggests the ways in which labor advocacy can change the calculus on which employers’ decisions are based.

The research on advocacy efforts for low-wage workers often starts with the insight that low wages are not inevitable or a predetermined outcome of economic change, and then looks for potential inroads for securing better jobs and better pay in an era where traditional labor institutions have collapsed or been greatly weakened. The advocacy efforts depicted in this scholarship have used low wages as a central organizing principle, but their strategies reflect an

understanding that low wages are associated with job characteristics that make organizing strategies within a single firm or industry unsuccessful. When jobs are contingent and when the offending employer is hard to pinpoint within numerous contractual layers, organizers find it difficult to use the traditional labor union strategies to collectively bargain. Instead, organizers invoke community belonging or other forms of identity politics to mobilize groups of workers (Piore and Safford 2006; Ghandnoosh 2013).

Studies of these new forms of advocacy have shown that unions representing low-wage workers, such the Service Employees International Union and its affiliates, have pioneered new forms of community organizing that link job quality concerns to identity politics (Milkman 2006). Here, we also find examples of hybrid community-labor approaches that target low-income immigrant workers in particular (Milkman 2000; Milkman and Wong 2000; Osterman, 2002). Worker Centers are a case in point, providing a laboratory for pioneering new approaches to organizing and outreach that are often based in immigrant neighborhoods and that seek to promote job quality in immigrant-heavy industries, such as construction, housekeeping, and hospitality (Fine 2006; Valenzuela Jr 2014).

Still, while this scholarship provides us with a rich and textured empirical understanding of the world of low-wage work and illuminates a pathway for labor advocacy, it shares a familiar blind spot when it comes to the question of skill development and more specifically the collective learning processes that workers contribute to, even within this low-wage context. Admittedly, some labor scholars have chosen to back away from questions of worker skill altogether, fearing that this discussion will shift the focus *away* from job quality to worker characteristics. Arne Kalleberg summarized this concern best, arguing that a focus on skill can lead to the problematic reframing that there “might be good and bad workers, but not good and

bad jobs” (2011:6). Moving the focus away from skill and towards institutional erosion has ultimately allowed labor scholars to mount a powerful challenge to long-standing claims by neo-classical economists that rising income inequality is simply the outcome of declining or irrelevant skills (Osterman 2000; Levy and Temin 2007). But paradoxically, the lack of attention given to learning processes by institutionally-minded scholars only reinforces many of the same assumptions that traditional theories of human capital make about skill and how it gets produced and by whom.

As in the standard human capital model, workers are presumed to be compensated less because they lack skill at that moment in time. Thus, many scholars advocating for improvements at the bottom of the labor market also seem comfortable using the terms low-wage and low-skilled interchangeably—and when describing skill, present it as an individual attribute, fixed in time. Additionally, in the same way that educational programs rank high as essential sources of general skills in the traditional human capital narrative, so too do formal external institutions in the low-wage camp, even if the mix of training institutions is more varied. Some scholars even make the case that workers remain trapped in low-wage, dead end jobs because of their exclusion from formal educational and training institutions (Appelbaum *et al.* 2003; Grimshaw 2010). By extension, this leads to calls for expanding access to formal training systems through which low-wage workers can develop their skill and in turn, gain access to better jobs. Admittedly, some studies of low-wage work do make an important conceptual break from traditional human capital theory by challenging the very notion that skill is a pre-requisite to higher wages and instead outlining a compelling argument that payments of higher wages will lead to industry upskilling. However, this revised twist is often predicated on the logic that

employers will invest in worker training in order to off-set those higher wage costs, thus reinforcing yet another tenet of traditional theory.

What is missing from this research is an analytical space for also revealing *how* learning happens within low-wage jobs, even if employer recognition and institutional support is initially absent. Paying attention to skill development turns our attention back to the job, but also brings squarely into the frame the social processes through which workers actively shape their jobs through their collective learning. In the example of low-wage construction jobs we provide in this essay—which is implicitly echoed in other ethnographies of low-wage work—workers used these social learning processes to improve the quality of their jobs and press for higher wages, more discretion, and greater job security. In a virtuous cycle, they used social interactions on the jobsite to strengthen collective learning practices, thus deepening their skill contribution and increasing their leverage to push for better working conditions. And equally the immigrants we studied also attempted to create norms and other proto-institutions to protect their skill building processes and contributions. However, these efforts at bottom-up institution-building have proved insufficient to compel the majority of employers to compensate and reward workers fully for the skills they collectively create and replenish. This suggests the need for further analysis that connects investigations of skill and collective learning in low-wage jobs to an exploration of avenues for further advocacy.

5. A New Politics of Skill

The current and ever growing spotlight on low-wage work has been essential for inspiring policy change and is clearly behind recent advances in minimum- and living-wage legislation and

efforts to shore up state and federal labor laws. Still, there is an opportunity for the next round of scholarship on low-wage work to advance worker bargaining power by situating workers as active participants in collective processes of workplace learning and thus, as contributors to industry performance and innovation. Retraining the research eye on collective learning processes can also help inspire low-wage advocacy organizations to fully embed worker contributions to industry skill within a larger narrative around worker rights and demands for social and economic justice.

Linking justice with skill thus necessitates a unifying conceptual platform for combining two currently divergent approaches to scholarship on labor advocacy (Adler 2006; Burawoy 2008)—first, an older tradition that uses “thick-description” to reveal complex social dynamics within occupational communities and in ways that reveal existing power struggles around skill; second, a newer focus on innovative strategies for worker empowerment and mobilization, including new partnerships to reinvigorate the U.S. labor movement. Connecting these two threads requires that we integrate labor processes *within* studies of the new labor movement, but also that we reposition worker advocacy efforts to engage explicitly with the politics of skill.

A useful starting place for this combined research endeavor involves documenting the diverse ways in which labor and community advocates currently link collective skill development processes to gains in worker compensation and worker rights more generally. While a voluminous body of research is dedicated to institutional practices that support collective learning within highly paid professions with particular attention to managerial strategies to reward and strengthen knowledge sharing, we know very little about related experiments that cultivate and protect collective skill development within the low-wage economy. What might existing models look like for low-wage workers in particular? How can

advocates help increase the visibility of worker-initiated learning processes and use this to secure better wages and improved working conditions at the bottom of the labor market? To what extent are these experiments inclusive of employers, and how adaptive are they to contingent forms of “fissured” work that might limit employer involvement and accountability?

An example by Leslie Salzinger, grounded in an earlier labor process research tradition, helps illustrate what can be gained from more documentation in this area (Salzinger, 1991). Through her comparative case study of immigrant housekeepers in the San Francisco Bay Area, Salzinger (1991) describes one successful cooperative, called Choices, as an “occupational community” through which women immigrant refugees shared knowledge and insights, and in turn, gained valuable lessons from older, more experienced housekeepers and nannies. As she put it, “members trade tips constantly, developing and sharing strategies to deal with dirty houses and impossible employers in the same breath” (Salzinger 1991: 149). A crucial focus of those discussions was communication with clients, and specifically how to use those conversations to draw attention to worker skills and a related commitment to quality service. This included empowering all members to make it clear at the time of service that quality required sufficient time be spent on a given task, but equally that members would “not work extra time for free” (Salzinger 1991: 148). Members of the cooperative ultimately encouraged each other to walk away from any job that undervalued their knowledge or undermined their sense of control over their work schedules and routine. The cooperative reinforced a space not only for collective skill-building, but also for using that shared knowledge as the basis for worker power, which was especially important as housework was typically performed individually, not by multiple members of the group.

The immigrant advocates at the non-profit that created the Choices cooperative built on the skill exchanges initiated by cooperative members, and brought additional training opportunities into the social interactions of the group, enabling members, for example, to learn about new cleaning products and what might be required when encountering a new kind of appliance, surface, or material. What is key, therefore, was the mutually reinforcing quality of this exchange. Rather than positioning the non-profit as the initiator of the learning process, staff saw their role as learning partners that contributed and helped facilitate a virtuous skill-building cycle. Their role also ensured the collective skill of the cooperative remained visible and formed the basis for securing wages that were almost twice the legislatively mandated minimum wage.

Fundamentally, the Choices experiment speaks to the need to document whether and how community and labor advocates today are transforming group learning into a collective and visible resource from which to garner better wages and improve working conditions. It is quite possible that local actors, like Workers' Centers, are developing strategies to cultivate and defend skill-building among low-wage workers, but research attention to efforts in this direction may have been edged out by the focus on wage-based mobilization. Even as we propose an exploration of the way that local labor advocates foster and protect collective skill-building, however, we are also mindful of the resource constraints facing many non-profit advocacy groups, especially Workers Centers. This suggests the need for additional research that helps link localized advocacy efforts to a larger macro-institutional push to strengthen the conceptual link between collective learning contributions and efforts to secure broad-based gains in wages and worker rights.

The current movement for an overall increase to the national minimum wage and regional increases above that to compensate for variable cost of living is grounded in an argument for

social justice and inclusion. This is a powerful framework, but without inclusive language around skill, it risks homogenizing jobs at the bottom of the labor market and, in the process, erasing industry specific skills contributions upon which further wage gains can be secured. Its emphasis on justice without equal attention to worker contribution through skill complicates larger conversations about how to create institutions that defend collective learning and ensure that workers are compensated for the full support they provide to industry.

In this essay, we call attention to the ways in which workers in low-wage jobs develop skills— skills that are specific to their firms and general to their industry, and skills that they hold individually and that they hold collectively in interactions at the job site and in their communities. We have highlighted the contribution their collective learning makes to production and productivity. Finally, we have argued that what is needed is a more visible and nuanced role of skill in the push for higher wages. Taken together, these observations suggest there is a case to be made that low-wage work itself represents a form of wage theft. Workers disproportionately carry the burden for industry training and skill development; non-existent or insufficient compensation for their investment in skill creation allows the jobs they hold to remain low-wage. As the movement for higher wages progresses, a stronger call should be made for employers to absorb more of the costs associated with this collective learning and not just reap its benefits. Even with mandated wage raises, jobs in which workers are paid anything short of an amount that reflects their full contribution still remain low-wage, and still undermine workers' ability to build solid livelihoods.

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