The Reputation Game: Searching for Low-Wage Work in Urban Nicaragua

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Lindsey M. Ibañez, MA

Graduate Program in Sociology

The Ohio State University

2018

Dissertation Committee:

Steven H. Lopez, Adviser

Timothy Bartley

Rachel Dwyer

Kammi Schmeer

Abstract

Sociological studies of job searching have long observed that personal networks play an essential role in job matching, especially in low-wage labor markets. Previous research has also highlighted the importance of the job-seeker's reputation for success in finding low-wage work. However, most of the research in this vein has focused on the outcome of the job search, leaving a gap in our understanding of the network processes involved in cultivating and mobilizing networks. Moreover, scholars have relied on the game-theoretic view of reputation, which defines reputation as information about quality that assist decision-making. This definition elides the fact that job-seekers are agents who actively shape their own reputations. In low-wage labor markets, job-seekers are trying to obtain job information and referrals from pre-existing network ties, making the low-wage job search a site of intensive relational work. Relational work refers to the processes through which actors navigate their interconnected social and economic lives. Finally, previous research has primarily focused on higher-income countries, which have more developed labor market institutions, leaving unexamined the job search in low-income countries.

This dissertation examines the low-wage job search in León, Nicaragua, drawing upon in-depth interviews with 105 job-seekers and workers as well as 19 low-wage employers. I argue that León's low-wage labor market reflects a reputation game, due to the importance of referrals and reputations in this context. This search game is the result of structural conditions that

generate vulnerabilities for employers and workers alike: informality, instability, low surveillance, difficult working conditions, and a lack of formal credentials. These conditions generate the need for trust between employers and workers, giving rise to referral networks. Job-seekers play the reputation game by cultivating networks and reputations; in particular, they assert that they are honest, that they like to work, that they need work, and that they have no vice. These declarations of worthiness, made by job-seekers and contacts, reflect the interests of employers and exert a powerful force of social control on workers in León. Contacts providing referrals must balance a desire to help the job-seekers in their networks with the need to protect their own reputations. Thus, they develop relational work strategies, including differentiating job-seekers. Job-seekers must also balance their own economic interests with reputational concerns, so they develop strategies such as providing an acceptable explanation to contacts before quitting a job. Employers also differentiate the job-seekers in their networks, and they distance themselves from their employee's decisions. This relational work allows these actors to build and mobilize referral networks without jeopardizing pre-existing relationships. However, not all job-seekers embrace the reputation game; some resist it by eschewing referral networks and searching directly. Instead of insisting on their worthiness, these job-seekers emphasize their rights as workers. While resistance was documented among men and women of all ages, resistance was more common among young women, who can obtain work at shops or at the export-zone factory by applying directly. Resisting the reputation game has a cost, as job-seekers are excluded from referral networks.

Dedication

Dedicated to the women and men of León, who taught me to play the game with integrity and heart.

Acknowledgements

Throughout this project, I have received indispensable assistance from many people and institutions. Kammi Schmeer invited me to join a research project in León, leading me to find my field site. She also guided the early stages of my writing, and she provided feedback on my grant proposals. I am forever grateful. The Food Innovation Center, the Center for Latin American Studies, and the Mershon Center for International Security Studies at Ohio State funded my initial research in the field, and the National Science Foundation supported my data collection the following year. I also was supported by the Institute for Population Research. The American Association of University Women funded me though a fellowship so that I could finish analyzing my data and write the first complete draft. My weekly dissertation writing group kept me focused and motivated, and it alleviated the isolation of dissertation writing. My friends and colleagues provided sustaining support and encouragement. Rachel Dwyer and Timothy Bartley provided valuable insights, and they connected me to the economic sociology community. Steven Lopez encouraged my ideas, even when they diverged from his; he challenged me, pushed me, read draft after draft, and sent me back to the drawing board despite my protests. He brought clarity to my scattered ideas and arguments. Thanks to him, I am a better scholar. All of the people mentioned above have left an indelible impression on my research and teaching, and I hope my work is worthy of them.

Vita

June 2000……. Westerville North High School

2004……..B.S. Journalism, Ohio University

2004 to 2006…… U.S. Peace Corps, Dominican Republic

2009……. M.A. Latin American Studies, University of Chicago

2012……..M.A. Sociology, The Ohio State University

2012 to present…….Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University

Publications

Ibañez, Lindsey M. 2015. "Beyond Inclusiveness: Institutions, Cooperation, and Rural Development." *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 36(4), 499-515.

Ibañez, Lindsey M. 2015. "Corporate Crime." *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Economics and Society*. Fred Wherry and Juliet Schor, editors. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 465-469.

Taylor, Jim and Lindsey M. Ibañez. 2015. "Sociological approaches to self-injury." *Sociology Compass* 9(12), 1005-1014.

Field of Study

Major Field: Sociology

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Preface

"God squeezes you, but he doesn't choke you." Domingo Alvarez, an unemployed 41-year-old, followed this saying with an explanation: "You might not have anything to eat, but all of a sudden a friend comes and tells you, 'look, there is a little job there...let's go do it.' So I go with that friend, we do the job, and we get ahead. Get it?" *God squeezes you* with hunger, but *he won't choke you* with starvation, Domingo is saying, because just when the economic situation seems utterly dire, a friend arrives suddenly with a job lead for temporary work.

Domingo says he started working when he was "13 or 14." Like most Nicaraguans who were born in the 1970s, he grew up in the countryside. His family lived near an *ingenio*, a plantation and processing plant, where Domingo's father labored and was paid roughly six dollars a week. To supplement the family income, Domingo's mother sold handmade tortillas to the company's cafeteria. Domingo and his siblings used to rise from bed at four o'clock each morning, he remembers. They took corn to the mill to be ground into flour, then they returned home to help their mother make the tortillas, mixing water with the ground corn and shaping the dough into thick disks, to be baked on a hot stone. "When it was six-thirty," Domingo recalls, "we'd get ready, we'd go to class." Domingo's mother and father had never attended school, so they wanted Domingo and his siblings to finish their studies. But as soon as he could, Domingo

says, he chose to start working instead. "Sometimes when you're growing up, you like money," he explains. Like many children of his generation from poor families, Domingo saw a more immediate payoff in wage work than in continuing his studies. And because he helped his parents with his wages, they did not protest when Domingo dropped out of school.

Today, Domingo lives in the city of León, on the western side of Nicaragua, near the Pacific coast. He works as a day laborer, doing odd jobs in the homes of more well-to-do residents. It is hard to say how much Domingo earns at this work, because the quantity of available work, and the rate he can charge for it, varies considerably. "I never put a price," Domingo insists, "because sometimes you give [clients] a price and they hire you the first time, but the second time they do not give you the job anymore because they say you charge too much." Instead, Domingo says, he enters into a delicate negotiation with the client, in which he tells her, "If this amount seems [acceptable] to you, we will leave it at that." Other times, the client offers the price she is willing to pay, and if Domingo disagrees, he must forego the job. Domingo's earnings, then, fluctuate erratically with the vicissitudes of León's economy and the whims of prospective clients. But the city provides just enough opportunities for Domingo to earn his living, even if it is a marginal one. *God squeezes you, but he does not choke you*.

***

Domingo finds these odd jobs through his personal network. "Friends recommend you to other people and they give you little jobs. So that's how you take care of yourself," he says. Getting recommendations from friends requires making friends. For this reason, Domingo says, he always is outgoing: "Wherever I go, people love me," he says. "I like to be sociable, friendly with people so that tomorrow they say, 'this guy is easygoing.'" Domingo prides himself on

being easy to deal with, which includes being flexible with the rates he charges, so that clients will seek him out again and recommend him to their friends. For Domingo, arguing for a higher rate today may cost him a job tomorrow, so he carefully cultivates his personal networks and his work reputation.

One way he attempts to bolster his reputation is by rhetorically distancing himself from other day laborers who behave unethically. Describing how other workers operate when hired to paint a house, Domingo says, "Sometimes the painters tell you, 'we are going to use two buckets [of paint].' Of the two buckets they use one and a half, and the rest they take and sell." To illustrate the contrast between other workers' opportunism and his own approach, he describes a time when he was hired to paint a house: Domingo says he told his client to buy one gallon of paint at a time because "I'd rather we run out than you spend more than you need to," he told the client, "because of how the [economic] situation is right now." Surely the economic "situation" is far more difficult for Domingo than it is for his middle-class client, but by signaling his understanding of, and concern for, his employer's interests, Domingo is asserting that he is worthy of his client's trust, and therefore deserving of future work opportunities. Domingo recognizes that his employability rests upon his reputation in his community. He also knows that in order to find work, he must cultivate and mobilize a broad network of friends and acquaintances. It would be tempting to look at Domingo's life and see something "traditional" there, something lost – an old-fashioned way of doing things, based on personal connections and a code of honor. But the labor market in which Domingo ekes out his living is a thoroughly modern one, and Domingo is far from alone.

León, where Domingo Alvarez lives and works, is the second-most populous city in Nicaragua, with more than 200,000 residents. In the center of the city is a plaza that resembles countless others throughout Spanish America. It contains a park, shaded by trees, where families, couples, tourists, and vendors congregate; a cathedral, which has the distinction of being designated a United Nations World Heritage site; and the municipal government building, the seat of local power. Also flanking the central square are a private Catholic school and a museum commemorating the Sandinista Revolution of 1979. León, which is home to the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua, is known as the birthplace of the Sandinista revolution. Forty years later, the impact of the revolution lingers on, in the murals celebrating the revolution's heroes and in the memories of the city's residents.

Behind the cathedral is a cavernous indoor market, where visitors can find everything from fruits and vegetables to herbal remedies, household wares, electronics, and clothes. Nearby are bakeries, boutiques, restaurants, cafés, and numerous hotels and hostels that serve the tourists who are drawn to the city's colonial architecture, historical sites, and nearby volcanoes. The oldest buildings have elegant courtyards, planted with flowers and adorned with turtles and colorful birds, giving visitors the feeling of being transported into a García Márquez novel. But beyond the center of the city, toward the periphery, the neighborhoods change. Tumbledown houses made of rotting wood hold families of seven or eight. Sturdier structures made of cement block house three generations under one roof. Homes constructed from wooden planks and sheets of corrugated tin shelter parents and children together in tiny rooms. Further out, on the outskirts of the city, clusters of black plastic tents flap in the wind. These belong to squatters, who occupy unused land in the hopes that the government will, sooner or later, deed the land to

them and help them build houses on it. Some have been waiting for years; they have raised children in these tents. Their hopes are not unfounded; other neighborhoods were established this way.

Overcrowding and substandard living conditions are prevalent in León (INIDE 2008). One or two generations ago, new arrivals purchased or were given parcels of land upon which to build their houses. Over time, the parcels have been divided and distributed among the owners' children, so that each person's share is small. Sometimes, grown grandchildren cannot find or afford housing of their own, so they occupy the same space with their parents, their grandparents, and, later, their own children. This situation can breed conflict and disorder – living in such close quarters can make disagreements among siblings or in-laws unbearable. Arguments occasionally spill out into the streets. There are few places to go for solitude or solace. When it rains, dirt floors become mud pits. Despite these drawbacks, however, most residents live in housing that is owned outright, not rented or mortgaged, so while income insecurity may mean food insecurity, it does not have to mean housing insecurity. All of León's established neighborhoods have electricity, plumbing, and trash collection. Dwellings often serve a dual purpose: they not only house the residents but also provide income from small enterprises: women sell tortillas or do nails; men fix cars or repair shoes. Nearly one-fifth of households in León are in extreme poverty, and another 30 percent are "moderately poor" (INIDE 2008, p. 51). But given the overall levels of poverty in Nicaragua, León actually has one of the lowest poverty rates among Nicaragua's 153 municipalities. In this way, León's residents eke out an existence that is marginal – *God squeezes you* – but tolerable – *he does not choke you*.

Chapter 1: Personal Networks and Job Searching

Domingo's "job search" bears little resemblance to what we might imagine a job search should look like – searching the internet, scanning a newspaper, or visiting workplaces to inquire about open positions. Indeed, the way Domingo talks about jobs makes it sound as though they simply fall from the sky. He describes himself as unemployed; he would like to have more steady work, he says, but such opportunities are scarce in León. So he keeps an ear to the ground, hoping for an opportunity, and in the meanwhile he relies on sporadic, informal, poorly paid day labor. He has no formal credentials – no diploma, certificate, or license to certify his experience and skills. He does not seek work through job centers or labor unions. Instead, relies on two interrelated things – his reputation and referrals from others – to find work. Domingo cultivates and mobilizes a network of friends and acquaintances, who provide him with job leads and who spread the word to other prospective employers.

A person's relationships with others – her *personal network* or *social network* – can help her learn a new skill, find out about a job opening, find her future spouse, choose a college or a neighborhood to live in, pay for her education, meet new friends, develop a sense of identity, receive career advice, and cope emotionally during stressful times, among many other things. Networks benefit individuals by conveying information, leveraging influence, and signaling group membership or credentials (Lin 2001). Observing the essential role of networks for conveying an array of important resources, sociologists developed theories of *social capital* to study the resources that inhere in networks and the processes through which these resources are

mobilized (Bourdieu 1983, Coleman 1988, Portes 1998, Lin 2001, Smith 2005). At the same time, scholars developed a social network approach to economic life, rooted in the work of Mark Granovetter (1973, 1985). The network perspective in sociology was developed, in part, to counteract the "under-socialized" approach, which over-emphasizes the agency of individuals, and the "over-socialized" approach, which over-emphasizes the structural constraints that shape behavior (Granovetter 1985). Social action is embedded within social structure (Granovetter 1985). Therefore, studying networks requires attention to both "structural constraints and opportunities as well as actions and choices on the part of the actors" (Lin 2001, p. 3).

Although network theory acknowledges agency, in practice scholars have paid far greater attention to the resources that are obtained from networks, or to the types of network ties that provide resources, than to the processes by which individuals cultivate and mobilize their networks (see Lin 1999, Huffman and Torres 2002, Yakubovich 2005, Mouw 2006, McDonald et al 2009, Castilla et al 2013b). This focus on the outcome, rather than the process, is partly a function of the data that are used and the methods used to analyze them: much research is based upon surveys that ask respondents about their networks and about resources, such as job leads, recently obtained. In such studies, the network is already cultivated and mobilized. Agency is assumed, but it is not examined directly. What is missing is an in-depth account of how people build and mobilize their networks (see McLean 2007 for an exception). This is beginning to change: in a recent symposium of the Academy of Management meetings, a group of scholars called for greater attention to agency in constructing, mobilizing, and renewing network connections (Lee et al 2017). They leverage experiments and field studies to examine how actors choose when, how, and with whom to connect.

This is a step in the right direction. But most network research examines industrialized, affluent societies, leaving a gap in our understanding of how network processes operate in lower-income countries. Related to this focus on wealthier societies is an emphasis on the role of networks in upward mobility (Lin 1999, 2001), rather than economic survival, despite the fact that previous work indicates that networks are essential for survival among low-income populations in the U.S. (Stack 1974, Desmond 2012) and abroad (Lomnitz 2014 [1977], Peattie 1968, Espinoza 1999). To address this gap, this project examines network processes among low-income urban residents of a low-income country – Nicaragua. In particular, I examine the network processes involved in job searching, because the job search and networks are inextricably linked: between one-fifth and one-half of workers find their jobs through personal or professional contacts,[1] according to numerous studies (see Granovetter 1995, Hanson and Pratt 1991, Bian 1997, Yakubovich 2005). In Wellman's study of Toronto's East Yorkers, he found that between 31 and 48 percent of respondents received job *information* from one or more network members, and 21 to 31 percent of respondents had ties that offered job *referrals*.[2] Likewise, 21 to 35 percent of respondents gave job information to at least one tie, and 17 to 29 percent of respondents gave a referral to at least one network member (Wellman and Berkowitz 1988). Studies conducted outside the U.S. and Europe find similarly high levels of network assistance: In Bian's study of China, 45 percent of respondents used a contact to obtain their first job (1997, 1999), and roughly half of Yakubovich's Russian respondents found their jobs

[1] In this study, "network member," "network tie," and "personal contact" are used interchangeably to describe all the members of one's personal network – their set of social relationships.

[2] There are three ways a network member can help someone obtain work: 1) by passing along *information* about a job opening; 2) by offering a *referral* for the job-seeker vis-à-vis the employer; and 3) by *hiring* the job-seeker directly.

through contacts (2005). These studies show that network connections are an important source of jobs, but they cannot tell us *how* the job-seekers mobilized their ties.

Job searching in context

Most studies of job searching examine societies with highly developed labor market institutions, such as the United States, Israel (Sharone 2014, 2014), the Netherlands (Sprengers, Tazelaar, and Flap 1998), and China (Bian 1997; see Yakubovich 2005 for a study of Russia). Labor market institutions mediate between job seekers and employers, and they can be public or private. They include state agencies, job finding centers, career websites, industry-specific conferences, support groups, union halls, and placement firms. Job-seekers use these institutions to find out about work opportunities or to get advice on job searching.[3] Less is understood about job search behavior in lower-income countries, though studies of Latin American settings indicate that personal networks are mobilized for a variety of resources, including jobs (Peattie 1968, Lomnitz 2014[1977], Roberts 1995, Espinoza 1999). Evidence suggests that network-based labor recruitment prevails in lower-income countries and in the low-wage labor markets of wealthier societies. In economies characterized by flexible, unstable employment, personal networks bear most of the burden of spreading job information (Granovetter 1995[1974]), Sabel 1993). In Espinoza's (1999) study of urban Chile, 72 percent of workers received job

[3] These institutions are not always beneficial to job-seekers – job centers can reproduce inequalities (Smith 2007) and coaching firms can perpetuate narratives that lead unemployed job-seekers to blame themselves (Sharone 2013).

information from someone in their network. Lomnitz and Melnick write that for middle-class Chileans,

> The most frequent way of getting a job, particularly in the public sector, was by using contacts. Looking for a job entailed a mental review of all personal relationships until one hit upon a friend with some link to the personnel department of the specific agency where employment was sought. In the same way, when some position opened up, a list of relatives and friends would be gone over until the appropriate candidate was found…This system could be considered the principal mechanism for assigning jobs, since even people with the highest qualifications preferred to be backed by a contact and did not just count on their objective merit when applying for a job (1991, p. 22).

Peattie (1968) argues that the importance of personal networks reflects the fact that states and markets are insufficient to meet residents' needs. In such contexts, the network *is* the social safety net. Beyond noting the primacy of network contacts for finding work, however, these studies do not examine *how* job-seekers go about cultivating and mobilizing their networks. Again, agency is assumed but not examined closely.

Studies of job searching also have tended to focus on white-collar workers, following the work of Mark Granovetter (1973; see Huffman and Torres 2002, Lane 2011). Granovetter's groundbreaking study of professional, technical, and managerial (so-called "PTM") workers led to one of the most widely cited articles in sociology and the field of "networking," which prods job seekers to develop a wide array of shallow ties in order to facilitate the job search. For these highly skilled and credentialed workers, job searching is about connecting to opportunities that match their skills, experiences, and interests. Network ties convey "soft" information about workers and jobs to improve the "fit" between the worker and the job. Therefore, white-collar

job seekers utilize institutions, try to build networks, craft personalized application materials, and place great emphasis on their interview performances.

In a comparative study of tech workers in the U.S. and Israel, the sociologist Ofer Sharone demonstrates how the institutional context of labor markets shapes job search strategies (2013). To frame his argument that hiring institutions influence job search strategies by shaping the risks, rewards, and meanings attached to job search behavior, Sharone deploys the framework of social *games*, which are "sets of discourses, practices and strategies" (2013, p. 1). The games framework promotes analysis of the linkage between individual behavior and the broader social context through the explication of how institutions "individualize subjective experiences and mystify social structures" (2013, p. 17). In essence, every job search is a game that the job-seeker does not realize she is playing, and the rules of the game are determined by the institutional structures that match workers to jobs.

Leveraging a comparison of the job searches of tech workers in the United States and Israel, two countries with similar employment levels and strong technology sectors, Sharone finds that Israeli tech workers are matched to jobs through placement agencies, whose staff coolly evaluate candidates' experience and skills. Because of the impersonal distance and emphasis on credentials, Sharone calls the Israeli labor market for tech workers a "specs game." The key to winning the game, and getting a job, is having more impressive "specs" than the other candidates. In contrast, the U.S. context places greater emphasis on "cultural fit" in organizations; after the initial screening for qualifications, candidates are interviewed in person by prospective employers. The key to winning this "chemistry game" is making a personal connection with the interviewer(s), a task that demands tremendous emotional labor from job-

seekers. Moreover, Sharone finds that blue-collar job-seekers in the U.S. have their own search game – the "diligence game." To win, a job seeker must convince the employer that he is an "eager, complaint, and hard worker" (2013, p. 143). Because these qualities are difficult to covey on paper, blue-collar job-seekers resist applying for jobs online, preferring instead to approach prospective employers and demonstrate their diligence in person. Domingo Alvarez, the 41-year-old day laborer discussed above, uses his reputation and his referral networks to find low-wage work in León. His strategy is not the outcome of his national "culture" or his personal disposition toward job searching, but rather it is a product of the labor market context in which he finds himself.

For job seekers who lack the skills highly valued by employers in the knowledge economy, the goal is not to find a great fit or a better job, but to find a job at all. These job seekers utilize job finding centers (Smith 2007) and government agencies (Newman 1999) when possible, and they visit employers directly (Sharone 2013, Newman 1999), although the latter approach is often unsuccessful due to the sheer volume of applications employers receive. Alternatively, low-wage job seekers approach their network members for assistance. Existing research indicates that disadvantaged workers rely heavily on network contacts to find work (Lin 1999, Newnam 1999, Elliott and Sims 2001, Smith 2007, Smith 2010). In Smith's study of the black poor, 89 percent of her respondents had used networks to search for jobs in the past, and fully half of all employed respondents had found their most recent job through a network member (2007, p. 99). A study of three large U.S. cities found that 45.5 percent of blacks and 74.7 percent of Latinos living in disadvantaged neighborhoods acquired their job through a contact (Elliott and Sims 2001, p. 350). In Holzer's study of firms hiring less-skilled workers,

employers reported that 35-40 percent of new hires were generated by referrals from current employees, from organizations, or from people in the employer's own network (1996, p. 53). Holzer concludes, "The importance of informal networks thus appears to be relatively greater in the sectors...where more basic issues of personal behavior (for example, a lack of absenteeism) are of relatively greater concern to employers." (1996, p. 54). These studies indicate that networks play an outsized role in low-wage job searching, even in highly institutionalized settings. Again, however, these studies rely on survey and interview data that document the *outcomes* of network cultivation and mobilization processes, not the network processes themselves.

.

Referrals and reputations

Referrals are more valuable to low-wage job-seekers than job information alone, because employers prefer referrals from contacts who can vouch for the reliability and trustworthiness of job-seekers (Smith 2007, Smith and Young 2016). When considering referrals, contacts take into account the job seeker's reputation. In her study of job searching among low-income blacks, Smith (2005, 2007) found that the job seeker's reputation was a major factor shaping contacts' decision-making:

> Assessments of others' trustworthiness are typically based on reputation... [T]he opinions and actions of those making social judgements are largely attributable to the observations they have of actors' past actions or behaviors. Thus, reputation largely inheres in the individual. It is up to individuals to either cultivate or destroy their own reputation (p. 38)

Smith's understanding of reputation draws upon the game-theoretic work of Wilson (1985). Wilson proposes that reputations play a powerful role in games and markets, arguing that "reputation is a state variable affecting future opportunities; moreover, the evolution of this state variable depends on the history of one's actions. Hence, current decisions must optimize tradeoffs between short-term consequences and the longer-run effects on one's reputation" (1985, p. 27). Positive reputations deliver payoffs (for example, in the form of high prices for better quality products or future opportunities to do business) that justify the costs involved in building and maintaining them (1985, p. 53). Wilson notes that the language used to describe reputation treats it as a characteristic ("person A is reliable") but within it lies a prediction ("A is likely to be reliable") based on prior observations ("A has been reliable in the past"). Thus, the predictive ability of a reputation "depends on the supposition that past behavior is indicative of future behavior" (p. 28). The quintessential example is a repeated game with multiple players: player A's actions in the first iteration will be observed by the other players, which will influence their engagement with A in the subsequent rounds. Compliance is not automatic unless punishment for noncompliance is sufficiently severe; losing reputation can be a powerful deterrent of misbehavior.

Reputation entails not only firsthand observations of behavior but also third-party accounts. These third-party accounts spread through networks as gossip, which has a discernible effect on compliance. Feinberg, Willer, and Schulz (2014) demonstrate that even in situations in which exchanges with the same partner are not repeated, cooperation can be assured through gossip (diffusing information about a defector's reputation):

> [I]ndividuals readily communicated reputational information about others, and recipients used this information to selectively interact with cooperative individuals and ostracize those who had behaved selfishly, which enabled group members to contribute to the public good with reduced threat of exploitation. Additionally, ostracized individuals responded to exclusion by subsequently cooperating at levels comparable to those who were not ostracized (p. 656).

In the game-theoretic model, reputation acts as a deterrent to opportunism, promoting cooperation in the interest of collective goals. If the temptation to pursue one's own short-term interest at the expense of others is ever present, reputation tips the balance toward long-term thinking and fairer exchanges. Reputation is not equally important in all situations; rather, reputation is most salient when the quality of a good is difficult to assess at the moment of sale (Kollock 1994, p. 314, citing Akerlof 1970). Kollock writes, "The motivations of those we interact with can be inferred but never known directly and the quality of goods and services we are offered is often unknown or known only approximately" (1994, p. 317). These information asymmetries imply that exchange is usually entails some level of risk. The problem is especially serious if an exchange is a one-time transaction. Job referrals fit these criteria well: contacts cannot know for sure how job seekers will behave once hired, and job referrals are usually one-time transactions rather than repeated exchanges. A contact who provides a referral for a job-seeker assumes risk and has incomplete information, leading her to rely on the job-seeker's reputation to aid in decision-making. This gives job seekers a reason to mind their reputations.

Smith offers a compelling account of job contacts' emphasis on job-seeker reputation as well as job-seekers' "defensive individualism" in response to rejection by network contacts. But

her reliance on Wilson's game-theoretic view of reputation leads her to assume that reputation necessarily reflects past work performance. Missing here is an effort to explain how job-seekers attempt to cultivate networks and shape their own reputations. Moreover, Smith's study is missing an account of why trustworthiness is so essential for low-wage job-seekers and why referrals from contacts matter so much in the first place. Is absenteeism the greatest problem facing low-wage employers? How do referrals ensure reliability? If every job search is a game, what kind of game is the low-wage job search?

Networks, reputations, and relational work

In order to study how job seekers try to cultivate networks, shape their own reputations, and mobilize network members in a way that places agency at the center of the analysis, we need to move away from the game-theoretic conception of reputation and instead view reputations as sites of what some economic sociologists call *relational work.* Relational work is a "process by which people define the nature of their interactions and their specific expectations of each other" (Block 2012, p. 135). It involves meaning-making and boundary construction processes that delineate which roles and exchanges are appropriate for different types of relations. Zelizer (2005) writes:

> people create connected lives by differentiating their multiple social ties from each other, marking boundaries between those different ties by means of everyday practices, sustaining those ties through joint activities (including economic activities), but constantly negotiating the exact content of important social ties...Relational work includes the establishment of differentiated social ties, their

maintenance, their reshaping, their distinction from other relations, and sometimes their termination (2005, p. 32-35).

Moving away from network researchers' focus on structure, Zelizer and her colleagues emphasize the relational processes that guide economic life (Bandelj 2012). The difference between embeddedness and relational work, for Zelizer (2012), is that the former approach focuses on how economic activity is constrained or enabled by social relations ("embedding relations"), and the latter focuses on interpersonal negotiation and meaning-making processes ("constitutive relations"). That is, relations do not just constrain or facilitate the economy, relations *are* the economy. And while network studies of embeddedness emphasize outcomes like economic performance or decision making (see Uzzi 1997), scholars of relational work examine the process of "establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating interpersonal relations" with economic implications (Zelizer 2012, p. 149). From this approach, the consequences of network formation and mobilization may be positive, negative, or neutral from the perspective of the actors involved. Scholars have examined relational work in the contexts of life insurance markets, entrepreneurship, surrogacy, and more (see Chan 2009, Ruef 2010, Dali 2015, and Mears 2015). Zelizer emphasizes exchange, money, and care as the primary sites of relational work, but relational work can be observed in any activity that involves the collision of social relationships and economic goals. And while Zelizer emphasizes the formation, definition, and maintenance of network ties, tie mobilization is a process that also requires relational work, as actors attempt to extract economic benefits from their social connections.

Bandelj suggests that relational work is especially important under circumstances of uncertainty: "[W]hen actors are narrowly self-interested and have fixed goals, clear preferences, and complete information, little social skill is required and relational work is heavily scripted, and thus less visible. On the contrary, relational work will be more prominent and elaborate in economic situations that are more uncertain and ambiguous" (2012, p. 185). The network-based job search inevitably requires relational work on the part of the job-seekers, contacts, and employers because the connections involved are pre-existing social relationships but job-seekers are attempting to use them for expressly economic purposes – to obtain a job.

Studying referral-based job searching as a form of relational work has three distinct advantages over existing approaches. First, it allows us study job-seekers as strategic agents who have a keen interest in influencing their own reputations. From this perspective, we can view reputations not as labels that follow people around as consequences of past behavior but as sets of meanings that are constructed and reconstructed through social interaction. Reputational characteristics such as trustworthiness and reliability are subjective perceptions, not solid and unchanging traits.

Second, the relational approach allows us to examine how low-wage job referrals (and many other types of social exchanges) occur in the context of pre-existing social relationships, rather than an atomized market context. In game-theoretical approaches to reputation, buyers can turn away from an exchange if they do not like the seller's reputation; in referral networks, in contrast, exchange is not determined solely by instrumental considerations but also by obligation, affection, and other emotional entanglements, which may complicate contacts' decision-making. How do contacts deal with job-seekers with problematic or non-existent reputations? How do

contacts and job-seekers balance their instrumental goals with their family obligations and friendships? Focusing on network processes as relational work allows us to examine all this and more.

Third, a relational-work approach to the study of network processes allows us to examine power in a way that game-theoretic conceptions of reputation cannot. All exchange networks are imbued with power relations (Emerson 1952, Gouldner 1960, Blau 1964, Singelmann 1974, Molm 2010). Treating reputation as an informational signal that assists in rational market decisions elides the fact that, in real-world contexts, exchanges often occur between actors of unequal status. Low-wage job referrals, in particular, involve unequal power relations: contacts control access to an important resource – job information and influence – and thus wield considerable power over job-seekers; employers, as the gatekeepers to jobs, wield power over both. This is especially true when jobs are scarce and job-seekers lack alternative ways to find work. Thus, a reputation for trustworthiness may mean that the job-seeker is perceived as easily controlled or acquiescent to employers' demands. Indeed, low-wage employers emphasize manageability of workers (Moss and Tilly 2001, Shih 2002). Given the imbalance of power, asserting one's rights as a worker can jeopardize one's reputation, regardless of actual work performance. In the real-world context of referral networks, power and control are embedded in social relationships that have social and emotional dimensions, requiring both actors to navigate and reconcile their expectations and interests, if they want to benefit from the relationship without destroying it.

In the chapters to come, I bring a relational perspective to bear on the problems and processes of low-wage job searching in Nicaragua. Chapter Two lays out the distinctive features

of labor markets like the one I studied, relative to the kinds of first-world labor markets that are most often studied. It demonstrates how the features of the labor market create vulnerabilities for employers and workers alike, and explains how referrals help employers and job-seekers manage these vulnerabilities. Chapter Three explains just how job-seekers continually play a "reputation game" by actively building referral networks and cultivating positive reputations. The emphasis on reputation, I show, gives rise to discourses about the "worthy worker" – someone who is not a thief, who has no vice, who likes to work, and who truly needs work. Job-seekers are compared to this idealized image – and its negative opposite – by contacts and prospective employers. Chapter Four explores the relational work of job-seekers as they attempt to mobilize their networks for work, and the relational work of contacts and employers as they grapple with requests for assistance. I find that referrals came from a wide variety of tie types, with friends and neighbors the most common source of referrals. Building and mobilizing these relationships requires constant sociability, as job information often is shared during chance encounters in public. When mobilizing their networks, job-seekers avoid the awkwardness of asking for a favor by folding the discussion of their job search into casual conversation. Contacts often ask first whether the job-seeker is working or looking for work, giving the job-seeker the opportunity to make a request for assistance. Moreover, workers engage in relational work not only when looking for jobs but also when leaving jobs: if a job-seeker who has received a referral wants to quit the job without damaging her reputation in the eyes of the contact, she approaches the contact beforehand to lay out her reasons and seek the contact's approval. Contacts, for their part, differentiate the job-seekers in their networks, classifying them as a safe bet, a risky prospect, or a blank slate. Some contacts also prepare job-seekers by

describing the negative aspects of jobs, and some renounce responsibility for referrals. In sum, relational work is used to reduce risk while preserving relationships.

Finally, Chapter Five analyzes inequalities in the reputation game and the power dynamics in referral networks. The reputation game places the power in the hands of employers by sending a clear message about what job seekers have a right to expect from employers. This message, which emphasizes the needs and interests of employers above all, is reinforced by contacts. The reliance on referrals and reputations generates a powerful mechanism of social control for workers and job seekers. I show how the reputation game is shaped not only by power dynamics between employers and workers, but how it is also shaped by other categorical inequalities related to job-seekers' ascribed characteristics. This chapter also examines resistance to the reputation game. Despite the prevalence of network-based job search, some job-seekers attempted to go it alone. These job-seekers resist the reputation game by refusing to cultivate positive reputations or mobilize their networks. Instead of asking network members for referrals, these job-seekers approach employers directly. They emphasize authenticity in their personae, and they emphasize exploitation in the employment relation. They underscore their rights as workers, not their worthiness. Though found among men and women of all ages, this approach was especially common among young women who eschewed domestic work. This resistance has its cost, particularly the perception among older respondents that young workers are uninterested in work. But in return, resisting the reputation game frees job-seekers from the continual network-and-reputation-building efforts that playing the reputation game demands. The final chapter addresses the generalizability of these findings to other settings and a discussion of the future of the reputation game, as urban labor markets become characterized by

increasing educational attainment and the mediation of new technologies between employers and workers.

This project draws upon in-depth qualitative interviews collected in León during 2014. (See Appendix A for a full description of the methods and data). I spent six months in León, interviewing more than 100 workers and job-seekers of varying ages and occupations. Respondents were recruited from workplaces and neighborhoods by eight local research assistants. Participants were eligible if they were at least 20 years old, had previous work experience, were permanent residents of León (five years or more), had no more than a high school education, and were either employed or looking for work. The final sample contains 105 workers and job-seekers; 86 percent (90) of respondents gave job assistance to someone else, and ten percent (11) of these respondents had employed others. Respondents range in age from 21 to 65, with a mean of 41 (see Table 1 in Appendix A). Respondents were asked about how they searched for work and whether they had helped others find work. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted between 40 minutes and three hours, with an average duration of one hour. Three-fourths of the interviews were conducted by the author; the rest were conducted by research assistants. Detailed job histories and brief life histories were collected using a structured interview guide. For most of the respondents in the sample, job histories contained a mix of informal employment, formal employment, and self-employment. Common occupations for women include domestic worker, cashier/clerk, cook, market vendor, and factory worker. Common occupations for men include security guard, driver, mechanic, gardener, and construction worker. In addition to the 105 workers and job-seekers, 19 low-wage employers

were recruited and interviewed, in order to triangulate the findings from the main sample (see Appendix A).

I wanted to know how people searched for work and how they made sense of their job searches. Whom did they talk to? Whom did they avoid talking to? Which searches were successful, and which searches were unsuccessful? Did they, in turn, help other job-seekers? In interview after interview, respondents spoke of the importance of trust between the employer and employee. They spoke of the importance of a worker's reputation. They spoke of finding work through network contacts. They also spoke of a constant search for work: Laid-off workers found themselves back in the job market, or workers left jobs once they grew tired of long hours, low pay, or conflicts with employers. Moreover, the preference for referrals and the importance of reputation are the outcomes of the broader institutional context of the labor market, which generate a constant search for work and the need for trust between employers and employees.

Chapter 2: The Low-Wage Labor Market

This study was conducted in León, Nicaragua, an urban municipality in western Nicaragua with more than 200,000 residents. Nicaragua is a lower middle income country, with a market economy whose GDP is steadily rising (Gutierrez et al 2008). Although the government styles itself as socialist, most property is privately owned and the labor market is not state-controlled. The urban poverty rate is far lower than the rural poverty rate – 29 percent versus 68 percent – and the urban poverty rate remained unchanged between 2001 and 2005 (Gutierrez et al 2008). Poverty is pervasive in León: Nearly one-fifth of León's households are living in extreme poverty, and another 30 percent are classified as "moderately poor" (INIDE 2008, p. 51). Nevertheless, León's poverty rate is one of the lowest among Nicaragua's 153 municipalities (INIDE 2008, p. 46-48). Thus, León's residents face economic struggles, but they have relatively more opportunities than other Nicaraguans.

León is home to an export-zone factory that produces automobile components, a processing plant for agricultural products, and a peanut processor. These institutions are a major source of low-wage employment, but they are not the only source. The men and women I interviewed also worked for banks, supermarkets, clothing shops, restaurants, bars, hotels, auto mechanics, and bakeries. Students come to León from all over Nicaragua to attend the public university, and tourists from around the world travel to see León's colonial architecture and active volcanoes; in the center of the city, a clutch of hospitality and entertainment businesses cater to these groups. However, because most of the Nicaraguan students seeking a free public

education have few resources, and many of the tourists are European backpackers traveling through Central America on a shoestring budget, the service sector in León is a modest one; it consists of a smattering of casinos, nightclubs, restaurants, and bars in the center of the city, radiating outward from the central square. These businesses provide low-wage jobs as cooks, security guards, maids, gardeners, and servers.

These workers face a labor market that is dominated by informal, unstable employment and low wages; they lack formal credentials, and their workplaces often have little surveillance. Below, I explain how these features of the low-wage labor market give rise to the reputation game by generating vulnerabilities for employers and workers.

Informality and flexibility

Despite decades of industrialization during the mid-20th century, rates of informality in Latin America have remained high (Portes and Schauffler 1993, Gutierrez et al 2008). Like other lower- and lower-middle-income countries, Nicaragua's labor market is characterized by high informality; according to the International Labor Organization, 62.5 percent of urban Nicaragua's non-agricultural workers were employed informally in 2008. Whether a job is formal or informal has less to do with the type of employer or the size of the firm, but rather the nature of the arrangement between the employer and the worker: by definition, informal work is unregulated by the institutions that normally regulate employment relations (Portes and Schauffler 1993). Formal employees sign a contract and receive benefits in addition to wages, but informal employees have no contract and typically receive no benefits. Formal employment in the public or private sector is desirable from a worker perspective because it gives workers the

chance to pay into the national pension system, and workers in the formal sector earn more than informal workers (Gutierrez et al 2018, p. 23-24). In addition to their wages and pensions, formally employed workers in Nicaragua are entitled to annual bonuses (*aguinaldo*), one month of paid vacation time (*vacaciones*), and severance payments based on tenure (*liquidación*) (Gutierrez et al 2008). Some employers also offer advances on workers' wages (*prestaciones*). There are 12 different minimum wages, based on economic sector. Although Nicaragua's labor regulations are some of the least rigid, compared with other countries, the minimum wage may hamper the creation of formal jobs (Gutierrez et al 2008, p. 24).

Workers who are employed informally rely on employers to voluntarily provide benefits. Antonia Centeno, 58, is a domestic worker who has been employed by the same family for 13 years. When she retires in a few years, Antonia says, she expects her employer to hold up his end of the bargain by paying her severance; she says that he will owe her 24,000 *córdobas* (roughly a thousand dollars) in total. Antonia, like many of the workers I interviewed, plans to use these funds to start a small business when she retires. For informally employed workers like Antonia who do not participate in the national pension system, starting a micro enterprise is the only way to ensure an income during retirement.

One hazard of informal employment is wage theft. Rufina Silva, a 40-year-old domestic worker, described a time an employer failed to pay her:

> One time I went to clean [a house]…three times I went. And the lady afterward did not want to pay me…I got angry. 'Lady, you're not going to pay me? I have to work for my children,' I told her…The lady got angry and so I went to collect from the person who sent me [to her]. The other woman paid me because the lady

> did not want to pay me, so she [the contact] had to pay me…People told me, 'that lady doesn't pay, she doesn't pay, don't go [work there].' And no one wanted to work for her.

While domestic work is a common informal job for women, men work informally as day laborers; they too are vulnerable to abuse and wage theft. Jaime Lopez, 26, often hears about people looking for contractors and day laborers while working in his brother's barber shop. He passes along this information to clients in the shop. But by doing so, he runs the risk of making a bad match. "One time I sent a mason to [work for] a lady and the mason came here angry…she didn't want to pay him." Jaime replied, "What do you want me to do?" Jaime had passed along the job lead because he heard about it, but he could not vouch for the employer because he did not know her.

An employer's reputation is especially relevant in the unregulated informal economy, where there is little recourse for workers who experience mistreatment or wage theft. Taking a job with an unknown employer makes employees vulnerable to abuse. Victoria Narvaez, 55, related a story about a friend who went to work as a domestic in Managua after responding to a newspaper ad. "She didn't leave anything to eat, not until [the employer] returned she gave her something to eat, bad food…and she sent her to eat in the back where she had a bunch of dogs…The girl cried when she came back here." She told Victoria the employer insulted her, threatened her, and locked her in the house. Victoria tells the story as a cautionary tale about answering job ads in the newspaper.

Some respondents reported concerns with false accusations of theft from employers. False accusations against a worker are difficult to disprove; even an unproven claim can stain a

worker's record and jeopardize her future employment prospects. Contacts reported vouching for employers at the same time that they vouched for job-seekers, encouraging job-seekers to stay away from employers who had a reputation for falsely accusing employees of theft or misconduct. Even in formal employment relations, employees can be vulnerable to mistreatment. Rosalba, 38, had been working for two months in a fabric shop as a salesperson when the owner offered to promote her to manager and put her in charge of the register. At first, Rosalba was hesitant. "My friends told me not to do it because [the owners are said to] fire all their cashiers for stealing." Though she took this advice into consideration, in the end Rosalba accepted the promotion. Ana Peralta, 48, worked for a supermarket whose owner had a notorious reputation for harsh treatment of employees. "Word gets around, 'Oy, do not work there because that man is like that.' And everyone speaks very badly [of him]. And they used to tell me when they asked me, acquaintances [asking] 'Where do you work?' 'At [the supermarket],' 'Oh what barbarity, that one is horrible,' they used to tell me. 'Ah yes, girl, but there I am while there is no [other] work, I have to endure.'"

Although unemployed workers in dire need do not have the luxury of turning down jobs, an employer's bad reputation can drive away good workers who have alternative options. Aura Mendez, 34, works in the export-zone factory because she prefers it to domestic work, which she said is "exploitative." She said she has left employers who mistreat her, and she has refused to help the employer find a replacement. She tells others, "I left a job but I do not recommend it because of this and that, the lady is very misbehaved." Employers who employ workers informally and recruit through networks are aware that their reputation matters. Celia runs a business selling street food, which she inherited from her mother-in-law. She employs two

people, and she said she has to trouble finding workers because "they seek me out because I am very well known. They look for me seeking a job opportunity, since they already know by the person I am and the treatment I give them. I easily find [workers]." Celia asserts that her own reputation as a good employer facilitates recruitment.

In sum, informality and flexibility in the low-wage labor market makes employees vulnerable to wage theft, abuse, and false accusations. Therefore, job-seekers are wary of approaching employers they do not know, and they spread information about employers' reputations.

Instability

Blanco Cortez, a 50-year-old plumber, has held several different jobs over the years. But he says work is hard to find: "The economy here in León is very rough because there are few businesses…so the majority of people struggle to obtain work. Most work for themselves in what they can find. It is hard in León…there is quite a bit of poverty here in the city of León because it costs [a great deal of effort] to obtain work."

León is full of small businesses, with new ones opening all the time. But in Nicaragua's economy, where incomes are modest, entrepreneurs face challenges to establishing and growing their businesses. Micro-enterprise is an important way people survive underemployment, but fierce competition among micro-enterprises in León generates its own form of instability. Many small entrepreneurs opt for food-related businesses, reasoning that 'everyone has to eat every day.' Thus, due to low startup costs and few technical requirements, it is a crowded field. High competition and low profit margins create volatility that endangers the self-employment of

workers. Sol Mendoza, 29, is unemployed now, but she used to work for a man who operated a fried-food stand. When two other women on his street started selling the same food, his sales dropped; he was forced out of business and Sol lost her job. Estela Fernandez, 24, sold sweets during a spell of unemployment, but she gave up the business when other neighbors began selling too. It was no longer worth it, she said.

For low-wage workers in León, losing a job is a regular occurrence. Elias Valverde is a 40-year old driver who works for an affluent family; he once worked at a supermarket for two years, until the arrival of a new supermarket brought increased competition. Sales dropped, and Elias and his coworkers were laid off. Leonel Munoz, 41, spent three years driving a bus owned by someone else, but when ridership dropped the owner decided to sell the bus, and Leonel was out of a job. Edwin Ramirez is an unemployed 22-year-old; he said he loved his former job at a veterinary clinic, until his employer closed the business and left the country. Rufina Silva, a 40-year-old domestic worker, had to leave her former employer because he could no longer afford to pay her wages; he had been laid off from his professional job. Arturo Guzman, 26, was laid off from his pharmacy job when the owner made personnel cuts. Clara Vasquez, an unemployed 40-year-old, worked in a cafeteria owned by her sister, but Clara lost the job when her sister, an architect, found a job in her field and closed the cafeteria. The constant shifting of opportunities means that even those who are currently employed must keep an eye out for job opportunities in case they find themselves on the market again.

Several of the employers interviewed for this study were credentialed professionals who decided to start businesses after failing to find work in their chosen fields. Esteban studied to become a civil engineer; he opened a flower shop with his wife 15 years ago because at the time,

he said, there were "only three or four" flower shops in León. This relative lack of competition helped their business to survive. At the same time, however, flowers are a luxury item, not a daily necessity, Esteban said. "I believe it occupies last place among [a person's] needs because more than anything, decoration is a luxury. Flowers are a luxury." Therefore, Esteban's family business is subject to macroeconomic ups and downs. A similar sentiment was echoed by Gustavo Roque, a 51-year-old who runs a photography business from his home. Gustavo recognizes that his ability to stay in business depends upon the fortunes of his clients: "If I raise [my prices] a little more, people don't give me work…it's not that people are cheap, but that they don't have it to give you. Maybe they want a photo, a portrait of their grandmother, but they are not going to sacrifice their food money for that." If micro-entrepreneurs operating food-related businesses face stiff competition, entrepreneurs with more specialized businesses face the prospect of anemic markets.

Gustavo, like other small business owners, hires temporary help during peak seasons. In León's economy, consumer demand is neither high enough nor consistent enough for businesses to keep full-time workers employed year-round. Celia operates a street food stand, which she inherited from her mother-in-law. Like other business owners, she sees an uptick in sales during holidays – Christmas, Holy Week, and Independence Day – and these busy times sustain her tiny enterprise during the rest of the year. She hires workers to assist her during peak season, but she runs the stand herself during off season. Moreover, micro-enterprises are not the only employers who hire seasonally; even many "good jobs" are temporary or insecure. For example, jobs with international non-governmental organizations are coveted because they pay well compared to

other jobs, but they last only the duration of a specific project. And large agricultural companies like the peanut processor also employ workers on a seasonal basis, based on the harvest.

The imbalance of power between employers and workers also generates instability. Employers are often forced to lay off workers due to unfavorable economic conditions, but they also are free to fire workers on a whim. Adan Contreras, a 42-year-old security guard with a fourth-grade education, feels insecure in his job despite having a clean work record. Adan said his employer has fired workers suspected of organizing a union: "They just fired 25 [people] now...they do not have proof, they do not have names and signatures on paper of those who were organizing, only rumors. And that's why I tell you, for now I am here and later [I could be] somewhere else." Adan accepts with resignation the fact that his employer can fire him without cause. Adan describes the power imbalance stemming from the abundance of job-seekers relative to open jobs:

> There is quite a bit of unemployment, there are quite a lot of people going around looking for work. Therefore, they [employers] give themselves the luxury of [firing you] for x or y reason. That is, you went to the clinic and missed a day [of work], they give themselves the luxury, if possible, of turning you away or tossing you completely out of your shift, [even though you're] carrying your documentation, which is your proof that you went to the clinic and that [the doctors] tell you to rest. And unfortunately if your health is not too good let's say, since there are so many [unemployed] people [the employers] give themselves the luxury of telling you 'well we do not need your services anymore, go away.'

Workers feel the pinch of competition; even a small slip up or a misunderstanding can cause them lose a job, since other applicants are waiting to take their place.

Due to the erratic and unstable nature of employment in León, the search for work is nearly constant. A worker who is employed today knows that her job may be gone tomorrow. Therefore, workers must cultivate positive reputations even while employed, in order to avoid damaging their future employment prospects. They also must continue to cultivate and maintain networks of contacts who can provide job referrals if needed.

Long hours, low pay

Although León's residents describe their city's problem as one of "unemployment," in fact in lower- and lower-middle-income countries like Nicaragua, official unemployment rates are low, because people cannot afford not to work (World Bank 2013, Gutierrez et al 2008). Instead, underemployment is far more common. There are two ways to look at underemployment. According to the first way, a person is underemployed if he is working part-time hours involuntarily; he would prefer to work full time but cannot get the hours. According to the second way, a person is underemployed if he is working full time but his wages do not meet the two-dollars-per-day poverty threshold. In contexts where work is an urgent necessity but good opportunities are scarce, job seekers take what they can get. Even when the job search yields work, the search does not end. The job search only ends when the seeker finds a stable job with benefits and decent pay – a fairly rare occurrence. Workers who are employed but are looking for something better are called dissatisfied workers. Among the 60 respondents who were working for someone else at the time of the interview, most expressed a desire to find a better

job. Adan Contreras, the 42-year-old security guard, said he would like to find another job with better hours, but there are few options: "It is difficult to find [work] here in the city."

Like other low-wage workers, 44-year-old Ariana Perez tries to find jobs that offer the best possible hours and wages. Ariana said her employer understood when she left her restaurant job, which required her to work late hours:

> Where I've worked my image has never been smeared. I left the jobs, but maybe I left because something better came up for me. For example, staying up all night is harmful to me. So I was working in a restaurant, sometimes I left at midnight, I got up at four [in the morning] to do my children's laundry, to do things, so I felt exhausted. So then if a job came up that was for a domestic, that was during the day, I left [the job] that was at night and went to the daytime one. Like that. So I never had a problem that they did not give me a letter [of reference] because I had stolen something, that I was misbehaved, that there was fighting, no. Even now, I run into my [former] bosses, and they greet me with a lot of affection. They remember me.

Workers try to leave on good terms in case they need to return in the future. Karl Santos, 43, left his job as a mechanic in an auto repair shop, but he returned when he found himself in need of work again. The employer accepted him, he said, because "they had seen how I work and so they gave me the job again."

Workers and employers alike take a pragmatic approach to the labor market. Given the instability of employment and low wages, neither party offers or expects loyalty. Jasmine, a 30-year-old woman who makes homemade tortillas, employs three people. Jasmine said she can

always find employees because so many are seeking work, but she said, she cannot give workers the wages and benefits they deserve:

> You set the conditions that are deserved, as a worker or employee, but in the business one measures to see if it is possible to give them the conditions that correspond to them and that they need. And they accept it or they don't accept it, you see? Because as a worker I know that you deserve your vacation pay and sometimes the business does not give it. So they and I accept that they have to keep working this way, while they find other work. That is why I am not bothered and it is good for them when they find something better.

Jasmine's message to her workers is 'take it or leave it.' She acknowledges that they will 'take it' if they need the work badly enough, but they will 'leave it' as soon as they find something better. Workers who are employed in precarious, low-paying positions must keep an eye out for better opportunities. Thus, while it is relatively easy for employers like Jasmine to find workers, it is harder to keep them. She says, "There are others who only are [working with me] for a week, if they find another, better job and they go. And I accept it because you always have to seek your own improvement. I don't get angry. And they always come and go." Jasmine signaled toward one of her workers: "She [employee] was in another place a little while ago, and she came back. You see?" Celia, 42, who operates a fried food stand, said she hires people from her neighborhood who need work; she knows the job is demanding and the wages are low, Celia said, so she expects her employees to quit when they find something better.

Due to the low wages, workers also constantly seek opportunities to generate additional income. Even workers who are employed full time cannot pass up the chance to earn money on

the side. Adan Contreras, 42, once obtained a job with his brother's employer, who installed and maintained air conditioners for a company. Adan's brother usually did the company's jobs, and he arranged side jobs for Adan and their cousins. Adan's brother did not have time to do the side jobs himself, but rather than turning them down he sent Adan and two of their cousins. When I asked Adan if the employer would be upset about workers doing jobs on the side, Adan said no, because "he [brother] fulfilled [his duties toward the company]…That is, when you fulfill [your duty] they do not care what you do afterward." Adan worked this way for three years, until the company closed.

Even jobs in the formal economy involve long hours and low wages; the workweek in Nicaragua is six days, and can be extended up to 50 hours (Gutierrez et al 2008). When stable jobs are demanding or require long hours, workers cannot sustain them over the longer term. Women I interviewed reported quitting jobs to care for their young children, and workers reported losing jobs after becoming too sick to work. Some left steady jobs because they required late-night or early-morning shifts. In particular, restaurant workers, security guards, and factory workers reported that they worried about the negative health effects of working late shifts.

Workers also quit jobs over disputes with employers regarding job duties. This is especially common for domestic workers, whose job descriptions can vary considerably. When residents of León talk about domestic work, they may be referring to duties including cleaning, cooking, and caring for children. Typically, washing laundry is seen as separate and distinct from domestic work. Some domestics are hired to care for children only or to clean only.

However, workers say, over time they experience a type of mission creep, in which employers' expectations gradually increase and new duties are added to their job descriptions.

Turnover is so high in some industries that employers do not bother asking job-seekers for application documents. Denis, who co-owns a bakery with his brothers, said, "Sometimes the short period that they work does not permit us to be updating documents, to be requesting a [police] record, a certificate from [ministry of health], so we do it in an interim manner. And sometimes they do not like the job. [They work] one or two days and they leave." Bakery employees work long hours alongside hot ovens; not everyone can sustain working under such conditions. To limit employee turnover, Denis employs several of his family members, recruits through referrals, and hires new workers on a temporary basis first.

In sum, the low wages and harsh working conditions in León generate a situation in which workers constantly seek better opportunities. Job-seekers use their networks to discreetly inquire about open positions, as well as wages and working conditions.

Lack of formal credentials

In urban Nicaragua, the average level of education for residents age 25-64 was 6.9 years in 2004 (Gutierrez et al 2008). Some low-wage jobs require more knowledge and skills than others. The most common jobs among the workers interviewed were domestic worker, security guard, day laborer, food server, factory worker, and driver. Drivers need a driver's license, but the other jobs do not require formal credentials. And the respondents who worked in skilled occupations, such as cooks, bakers, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, and masons, lacked formal training in

their fields; instead, they were trained by older network members (usually family members).[4] Without certification, skilled workers rely on their reputations – that is, others' knowledge of their experience and abilities. When Ignacio Fuentes, 22, left his job at a bakery to take another, better-paying job at a supermarket, he recommended his cousin to fill the vacant position because Ignacio knew he had the experience. "He worked as a baker, right there he could hit the ground running like I did and do the same, the things I was doing." For low-wage occupations, the employers want assurance that the worker can do the job, especially when workers lack certificates or diplomas verifying their training.

Employers recognize the shortcomings of formal recruitment processes: resumes can mislead, references can be cherry-picked, and diplomas can reflect academic ability but not work ethic. Jacobo has owned a restaurant in León for 15 years. He said he has learned that "what they bring on a paper, on a resume, is not always true and that having a university degree is not a guarantee either." Workers who have skills but lack formal credentials rely on contacts to vouch for their expertise. Donald Castillo, 25, obtains small electrical jobs through his network. He has difficulty finding clients on his own without a diploma: "They ask you, 'have you studied that?' And you say no, and so they are afraid [to hire me]…so they call other people who have studied." Donald's wife and his church members provide referrals, assuring potential clients that he can fix their appliances or wiring.

In addition to skills and experience, some low-wage occupations require qualities that are difficult to convey on paper. Adan the security guard said, "any person can come and say, 'I have experience'…to get into a business like this you have to come recommended by someone

[4] Workers who have skills but no formal credential call themselves "empirical" (empírico) or "practical" (práctico).

who knows you." Even employers who require background checks prefer to hire through referrals, because a clean police record does not guarantee trustworthiness. Adan said, "to work as a security guard, the requirements are to have experience in firearms, to be a healthy person, to not be alcoholic…not to be violent…because they don't give everyone the privilege of carrying a weapon…there are some who believe themselves very manly and start to take [the gun] out and that is very prohibited." Adan obtained his job through a referral from someone he knew, who was willing to vouch for the fact that Adan knew how to handle a firearm responsibly.

For many low-wage occupations in León, no specific skill requirements are needed. Instead, employers value responsibility and diligence. Omar manages a hotel near the central square. When asked what characteristics make for a good worker, he said, "It has nothing to do with the technical side, nothing to do with the level of knowledge. It has everything to do with that responsibility, the disposition to learn, to be proactive…so this matter of experience, for me, is not so necessary…nor knowledge nor technical ability, because I believe that this can be developed and molded." Jacobo, who owns a restaurant, said that the qualities he seeks in applicants are "punctuality, organization, cleanliness…desire to work. Nothing specific. Have a desire to do the job that is needed here. That is all." The other employers also said they did not expect applicants to know how to perform every task; instead they trained employees. What they valued instead was a 'desire to work' and a 'desire to learn.'

All of the employers interviewed emphasized "responsibility," and several mentioned "punctuality." Macy and her husband operate a small pizzeria, and they seek workers who are "serious, responsible, because above all punctuality, right? Because it's part of the responsibility

because if not, later we have problems, [the worker] is not coming today for some such reason. Thus we ask that they be responsible." As the manager of a fabric shop, Rosalba Diaz counted on her employees to be reliable:

> [My employers] required a schedule of me, and I have to require a schedule of them [workers]. If they could not [come to work] then bring me proof so that I can defend you with my boss, credible proof, that is, if your child fell ill, give me the proof that you were at the doctor's [office] so that I can defend you because I also have to answer to my boss…But if a person came to ask for a job and the next day did not come, and came [late] to tell me that she could not, how could I trust? If you are starting you have to make effort to demonstrate that you want to and you can [work].

In León's gender-segregated labor market, Rosalba's employees were all women. In the eyes of employers, responsible female employees obtain documentation of their children's illnesses and make childcare arrangements to avoid missing work. Responsible male workers do not show up to work intoxicated and do not miss work. For small businesses that employ few workers, late or absent employees can impede their ability to function.

In the low-wage labor market, there are few formal credentials employers can use to screen out applicants. But employers need assurance that a new hire can do the job required, when the job requires skills, such as cooking or soldering, which cannot be quickly taught. Employers also want to recruit workers with qualities that are difficult to assess, such as reliability and trustworthiness. This gives rise to referral-based recruiting because contacts possess valuable information about applicants' skills and past work experiences.

Low workplace surveillance

In León, nearly 7,000 home-based enterprises employ more than 10,000 workers (INIDE 2008, p. 64). Many of these small businesses, including restaurants, bakeries, auto repair shops, and retail stores, are located in or adjacent to the employers' homes. These small businesses generally lack security cameras or other surveillance technology. Teodoro owns a cyber café and bookstore, and he said he leaves his businesses unattended for long periods of time: "I am someone who has many commitments outside [the business], family, of the church, so I am not so aware...and so [my employees] often work without supervision." Teodoro's four employees are largely left to their own devices during the workday. For employers, theft of money or materials is a major concern. Esteban, who owns a flower shop with his wife, fired a worker after they discovered that she had been stealing from them. "At closing time, the flower inventory was always missing. She did not turn over the complete inventory." Jacobo, who owns a large restaurant, said he has had to fire several employees for stealing. Omar, who manages a hotel; he acknowledges that trust is essential because employees have access to guests' belongings and little surveillance. He said, "When trust is lost, well, eventually you do not trust [the worker]...so that person does not suit you anymore."

For employers, hiring through referrals is a way to recruit trustworthy workers. Wilson owns a bakery that employs six people. He said that he only hires job-seekers who have "good references"; he said he avoids hiring strangers because some of his former employees were unable to resist the temptation to steal – "they carry off flour, carry off sugar." Rosa owns a clothing boutique and employs three people; she said she only hires through referrals and has

never hired someone she did not know. Katia owns an office supply store with her husband and employs five people. She said they hire through referrals because "people you don't know do damage, so we try to seek people who are recommended, who have references."

Victor, 72, has worked in construction for over 40 years, and he has been employing assistants for the past 15 years. He said he cannot supervise his employees constantly, so he needs to be able to trust them to do the job well in his absence because he depends upon repeat business and word-of-mouth recommendations. "I like to work with honest people, so I like to know them well in order to bring them to work [with me]…I don't like to bring people I don't know [because] I like to look good to the client and I do not like it if there is some flaw, so I like to know well who I am going to bring…with the confidence that I am going to leave and there is no problem." When hiring for a project, Victor must trust that the assistants he hires will perform high-quality work even when he is not there to supervise.

Some of the most common jobs in León's low-wage economy are domestic worker, handyman, and night watchman; these employees have access to their employers' property and often are left unsupervised for long periods of time. Nancy Bernal, 57, runs a small store from her house. She has hired employees in the past to help her with housework. "We could never bring into the house a person who we don't know. It has to be someone known and recommended…I have never brought a stranger into my house." One of Nancy's former employees was the wife of Nancy's cousin, and another former employee was an older cousin of Nancy's. She currently employs a woman who used to work with someone Nancy knows well. Even though Nancy lacks a direct close tie with the worker herself, Nancy's close tie with the contact allows Nancy to trust the worker more than she would trust a stranger. Aura is a 34-

year-old factory worker who has worked as a domestic in the past. She explained, "You need the *patrón* to trust you, or someone to recommend you: 'See, this person is trustworthy to work in your house.' That is how people find domestic work here."

Low levels of surveillance in the workplace not only leave employers vulnerable, it can leave employees vulnerable too. When employers lose or misplace valuables, they may level false accusations against employees. Miguel, the 52-year-old day laborer, said he had been falsely accused of theft "not only one time, but several times." He said,

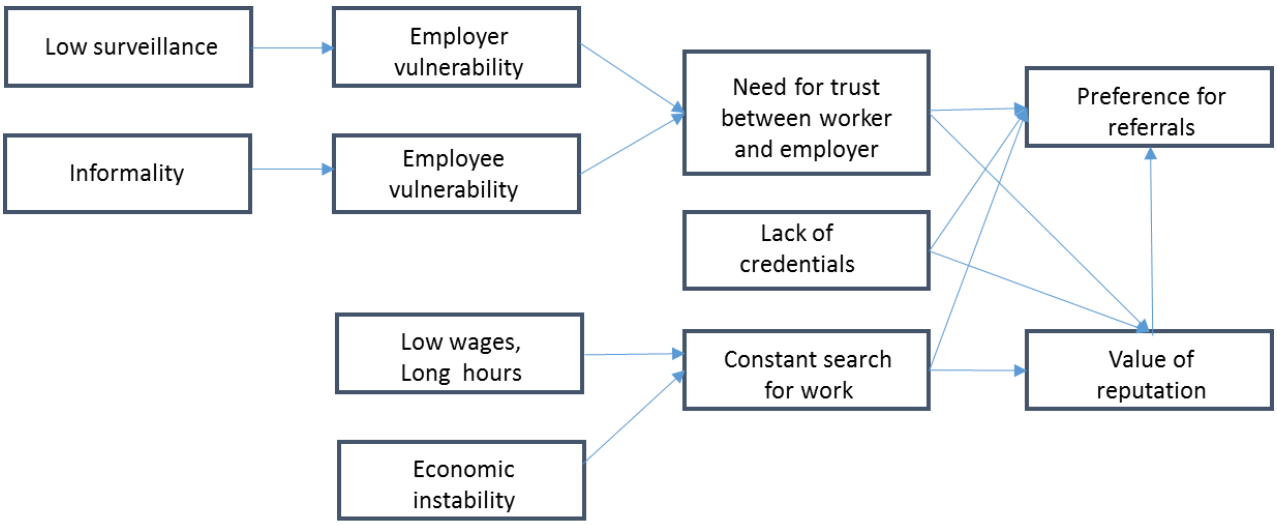
> It bothers me profoundly and angers me, because…I go [to work] to gain, not to lose. Because if I do any damage, the injured one will be me. First of all, the jail waits for me, I am marked in the eyes of these people, and who knows how much time I will be locked up. I can no longer count on that person nor on any other client because they are not going to recommend me…But later when the owner resolves [it] and realizes in the flesh that she was accusing me unfairly…she thoroughly understands the person she did damage to, so that person seeks me out and asks me for forgiveness, for me to forgive her because it is a mistake…I forgive her because they are errors that are committed in times of cholera.

Although Miguel is angered and frustrated by false accusations, he cannot react too strongly because he needs his clients and their referrals. Instead, he must trust employer to conduct a fair investigation and come to the correct conclusion. (In the next chapter, I show how stories like Miguel's are part of job-seekers' reputation-building efforts.)

León's low-wage labor market is characterized by informality, economic instability, poor working conditions, a lack of formal credentials, and low surveillance. These features generate

vulnerabilities for employers and workers alike, creating a need for trust between employers and workers. This need for trust manifests as a reliance on referrals to match workers to jobs, and the constant search for work leads to the preeminence of reputation as an abiding ethic (Figure 1). Employers are not without vulnerabilities – trying to operate a successful business in a marginal economy requires careful attention to costs. Recruiting through referrals allows employers to wield greater power over employees, thus reducing the risk of losses from turnover or theft. Employers cannot trust applicants they do not know, so they seek referrals from those they do trust. When contacts vouch for applicants they not only assist with matching workers to jobs, they also facilitate the formation of trust between employer and employee. Through referrals, employers find trustworthy workers and job-seekers find decent employers. Once a job is found, the game does not end; reputations and networks must be cultivated continuously so that they can be activated at a moment's notice.

Figure 1: Model of the reputation game



Chapter 3: The Reputation Game

Domingo Alvarez, whom we met in chapter one, goes by the nickname *El Pelón*, which means Baldy in Spanish, in reference to his close-shaved head. In his neighborhood, he said, people knows him, and they know one another. The 41-year-old day laborer recounted a time when he was hired by a woman who was newly arrived to León and knew few people. Looking for someone to do some improvements to her home, she asked around. Domingo's neighbors pointed him out to her and recommended him for the job. The neighbors were careful to distinguish Domingo from another man with the same nickname and a less-than-stellar reputation, in order to ensure that the job opportunity went to the intended recipient:

> The people – because here people in the neighborhood know one another and everything – they tell her, "We have someone here in the barrio. It is Baldy." [she said] "Which? The baldy, [Diego], who is a drunk?" Because here there was a man...who was also called Baldy but he was a drunk. "No," they told her, "that guy coming over there." "Oh, that one." So the lady spoke with me. "Look," she says, "I need you to do a little job for me."

Domingo's story may be apocryphal; there is no way to know for sure whether events occurred the way Domingo tells them, especially since he is recounting a conversation that occurred in his absence. But the value of his account lies not in the veracity of the events but rather in the contours of the story as Domingo tells it: he did not know this client personally, but his neighbors readily volunteered his name. By emphasizing that his neighbors distinguished

him from the other Baldy, a known alcoholic and unreliable worker, Domingo also is distinguishing himself from that Baldy, who serves as a stand-in for all of the other undeserving job-seekers in León. In Domingo's telling, he received this opportunity because he was worthy of it. His neighbors trusted him enough to recommend him to the client, Domingo asserts, because he is trustworthy.

Once Domingo was hired to do the job, he continued, his trustworthiness was tested: The employer left valuables and cash lying around, then left him alone in the house to see if he would take anything:

> "I'm going," she says, "to the store. Well, I leave the door open for you, so you can drink water or anything." "Fine," I tell her, but when I go inside to drink water, the door is open, so I see that on the table there were three gold chains…a bracelet, and there were some two thousand pesos[5]…I was astonished…So I came and shut the door. In the afternoon she says to me, "Baldy, who closed the door?" "I closed it," I tell her. "Why?" She asks. "What if I didn't have the key?" "I don't know what you would have done," I told her, "because I wasn't going to lose [those things] that you left there."

The employer told Domingo she had forgotten the jewelry and cash on the table, but Domingo disagreed. "You were testing me to see if I am a thief," he told her. This story, too, may be apocryphal. There is something almost biblical about it – the honorable man turning away from temptation, thereby triumphing over wickedness. There is no way to verify the veracity of Domingo's account. Importantly, however, Domingo was not the only one who told

[5] The Nicaraguan currency is the *córdoba*, but Nicaraguans often refer to their money as "pesos" or "riales."

such a story; other respondents gave similar accounts of being tempted by employers. In each case, of course, the respondent resisted the temptation and won over a skeptical employer; like Domingo, they triumphed over temptation and demonstrated their trustworthiness. Regardless of whether or not the employers actually leave valuables lying around on purpose to test workers, these stories serve an important purpose for job-seekers: conveying their trustworthiness to the listener.

In the previous chapter, I described the features of León's low-wage labor market, arguing that economic insecurity and low wages generate a constant search for work, while informality and a lack of surveillance generate vulnerabilities for workers and employers, which create the need for trust. Trust is defined as the "the belief that the exchange partner can be relied upon to help, rather than to exploit, the actor" (Molm 2010, p. 123). In a basic prisoner's dilemma game, there are two players – A and B. If player A cooperates and player B defects, player B wins, and vice versa. If both players defect, they both lose. If both players cooperate, they both win. But in order for this optimal outcome to be achieved, each player must trust that the other will cooperate instead of defecting. Trust is essential for economic exchange in general (Blau 1964; Granovetter 1985), but it is not equally important for all types of exchanges. Rather, trust is most important in markets for goods whose quality cannot be easily assessed at the moment of sale (Kollock 1994; Akerlof 1970), and trust is necessary for relations in which one party cannot control the other's behavior (Kollock 1994, p. 319). Thus, low-wage employers look for trustworthy workers, and job-seekers assert this trustworthiness at every opportunity. In the game-theoretic model, players have information about their partner's past behavior; in the low-wage labor market, this information is far from perfect, and job-seekers like Domingo

attempt to actively shape their reputations. Stories like Domingo's reflect active reputation building efforts. Words alone are cheap, however; a favorable impression can easily be made by a skillful actor with malicious intentions. This fact is not lost on low-wage employers, who need more than mere assurances of a job-seeker's trustworthiness. Therefore, low-wage employers often rely on referrals from third parties to recruit new employees. As a result, low-wage job-seekers must cultivate reputations and referral networks, a process I call the *reputation game*.

Learning to play the game

Parents teach their children, and older workers teach younger workers, how to play the reputation game. Antonia Centeno is a 58-year-old domestic worker and divorced mother of two. Antonia said she is often approached by employers who want to hire a domestic worker. Before recommending someone for the job, Antonia explains,

> The first thing I tell them is "look, I am going to get you in to work but don't make me look bad. You are not going to touch anything, no matter how much need you have," I tell them, "but you need the job. Because look, if you touch something, no one will recommend you for a job anymore. No matter how poor you are, you need to be honest with your hands." Because my mother taught me that, to be honorable with my hands. She was a rough woman I tell you, and well, she didn't let us touch anything. My mom, look, if we found something in the street, [she would say] "Go put that back where you found it. That isn't yours. Where you found it, and if you come back with it I will hit you."

Because a damaged reputation can affect one's livelihood, respondents reported instilling in their children the gravity of others' perceptions of them, and they also reported receiving tough discipline from their parents. Respondents described suffering severe punishments as children when they were caught stealing or lying. Even collecting fruit that had fallen from a tree in a neighbor's yard was grounds for a beating. Relating these episodes, respondents did not offer them as evidence of abuse, but rather as evidence that their parents had strong morals and strove to instill them in their children. Respondents expressed gratitude for these lessons. In a context where one's employability depends upon a trustworthy reputation and mistakes made early in life can have lasting repercussions, harsh discipline is seen as a legitimate way to socialize children into the reputation game.

When Antonia Centeno's sons were very young, she explained, her mother watched the boys while Antonia worked because Antonia trusted her mother to discipline them strictly:

> I am not going to leave them [with anyone else] because they will get corrupted on me…There is my mom, there you are, and any bad thing you see them doing, you strangle them for me. You don't let anything bad happen to them because they are little boys. And, thank God, my sons have no vice, and they are very studious. I give thanks a thousand times to my Lord [and I hope] that they stay that way always.

While Antonia's approach to discipline may seem harsh, her gentle demeanor as she spoke and her apparent love for her children underscore her belief that tough love is in the best interest of her children to prepare them for the world. While workers under 40 were less likely

to describe physical punishment, they reported being taught the value of reputation by their parents. Sara Gomez, 25, said her mother raised her and her brother to be reliable workers: "My mom has taught us that. [In] a job you have to be responsible. You never need to look bad. You never need to touch others' things…So thank God my mother has been excellent. She has educated us very well."

First-time workers also learn the importance of a trustworthy reputation while on the job. Adan Contreras, 42, worked for his brother, installing air conditioning units. They often brought their nephews along with them, to teach them the trade and to instill in them the importance of a trustworthy reputation: "Many times we came to do installations in the homes of pretty comfortable people, with [designer] clothes, with expensive phones, things like that…so we tried to teach [our nephews] not to touch anything." Later, a potential employer called Adan for a reference for one of the nephews, who had applied for a job. The employer asked if the nephew was trustworthy, Adan said he was willing to provide a letter of reference because he had played a role in his nephew's training and had worked alongside him.

Testing trustworthiness

Given the value of a trustworthy reputation, workers and job seekers in León assert their trustworthiness at every opportunity. Attempting to prove that that their assertions are more than mere "cheap talk," of which people are understandably wary (Molm et al 2009; Moss and Tilly 2001, p. 232), respondents offered unsolicited anecdotes that illustrated their honesty and integrity. Miguel, a 42-year-old day laborer, described how employers had tested his

trustworthiness in the past by leaving cash or jewelry out where he could see it, tempting him to steal it.

> If I arrive at your house for the first time and you distrust my person, you can toss me a bangle, a ring, a chain, something. And I, seeing that, because I have to pass by there...I know that it is a test that they are doing to me. I pick it up and say "Look Madam, if you think I am a thief I am not going to fall for this...because I came to work, not to lose." So in that way, I have recommended myself...I have demonstrated my honor to my clients.

Because he passed these tests, Miguel said, his clients trust him: "Actually I have people, clients, who are [normally] very mistrustful and they leave me in their houses with the door open."

Rufina Silva, a 40-year-old domestic worker, said she was cleaning an employer's house one day and found a twenty-dollar bill under a sofa. "I didn't take it. I told the lady, 'Look, here is this money'…I gain the [employer's] trust and that way I have my job." Rufina probably could have gotten away with taking the money, but she was unwilling to risk raising her employer's suspicions and jeopardizing her current and future employment. It is not clear whether these stories are faithful depictions of actual events or apocryphal tales intended to make a point. But such stories were recounted by so many respondents – male and female, old and young, skilled and unskilled – that they form an unmistakable pattern. Adan Contreras, 42, used to install and repair air conditioning units with his brother. He described a time when he was tested by an employer:

> I remember one time a house [we worked in], "I want you to put an AC unit here," a lady [told us]. We were working, I saw, the first thing we see…The bed didn't have anything [on it]. When I went back in a little later, I saw there was…a roll of bills on the bed. So I felt uncomfortable. I called my brother over. "Look," I tell him, "I don't know if they are doing this to see if we push it, but this was not there and now it is. Call her and tell her to take it away and there's not going to be that someone else comes and grabs it, whether an employee of hers or whoever or her herself and she wants to nail us." So he called her and told her, "Look, my worker found this there, he is complaining that that was not there and now is it there. We do not want misunderstandings."

Domestic work and day labor are not the only occupations that require a reputation for trustworthiness; employers in formal organizations test their employees too. When Alex Herrera, 44, began a new job in a bank, his employers tested his trustworthiness by giving him access to a drawer with cash in it:

> They would send you to fetch a pen, over there in any desk. "Go to that desk and take out a pen for me." I innocently opened it. I closed it again. But there was a camera there. After that, I did not know, later when they were signing [receipts] and everything, [they told me] calmly, "We were testing you." So since I had passed that test, maybe an affluent client who could not wait in line, would just call [and say], "Can you send me five thousand dollars here, I will sign for it here?"…I went with the confidence that I was not going to touch one cent. And the client received it, counted it.

By explaining how he handled large sums of money without stealing them, Alex asserts his trustworthiness. Retelling the stories of how their trustworthiness was tested in the past by employers is one way that job seekers and workers generate a trustworthy impression during interactions.

Repairing reputation

Despite the strenuous efforts of parents and other elders, lessons are not always followed. Once hired, job seekers sometimes act opportunistically – they fail to show up, perform poorly, quit suddenly, shirk their duties, or steal from employers. There are several explanations for this: (1) reputation doesn't matter as much for them, perhaps because they can conceal their identity more easily from those who can gossip about them; (2) they fail to perceive the importance of reputation; (3) they underestimate the degree to which their negative behavior affects their reputation, or they overestimate the degree to which positive behavior improves reputation; (4) the benefit of the defection, in their mind, outweighs the cost of a damaged reputation. In any event, reputations can be damaged, affecting job seekers' ability to find work.

One way job-seekers improve their reputations is by incorporating feedback. Because it is awkward to ask others for negative feedback, especially in a face-to-face context, workers rely on third parties to find out the employer's true impressions and relate them back. Francisco Roque, 57, told a story that illustrates this well: When Francisco was a young man, he was hired as an assistant to the superintendent of a public hospital, temporarily replacing the superintendent's godson, who was on medical leave. After he had been working for a while, his

mother told him she wanted to find out how he was doing on the job. "I think the best thing is for me to go to talk to the doctor to see how it is going for you," Francisco remembers his mother saying. "So she went and he told her, 'everything is fine with him, it's just that I see him as a little bit slow,'" Francisco recalled. "So my mom comes back telling me this. 'Leave him to me,' I told her," Francisco said with a laugh. At work the following day, when Francisco's boss summoned him, he raced to respond. "I came out like lightning…and so after that he didn't say anything else to me."

Francisco's mother played a key role in the development of Francisco's work reputation by seeking feedback about his job performance from his employer and sharing it with Francisco. When parents express concern about an employer's impression of their child, it reinforces an important lesson for young, inexperienced workers: Others' opinions matter, because opinions become reputations, and reputations shape opportunities. In Francisco's case, his reputation-building efforts paid off: When the employee for whom Francisco was temporarily filling in returned to reclaim his job, Francisco was offered a steady job in another part of the hospital, due to his reputation for "effectiveness." Later, when the employee was killed in a tragic accident, Francisco was asked to return to his former job.

Other contacts also reported checking up on the workers for whom they provide referrals. Samantha Vanega, a 47-year-old domestic worker, recommended one of her neighbors for a job with her employer's niece. To find out how the worker was performing, Samantha said, she asked the employer "how is so-and-so behaving?" The employer's response, she recalls, was "Well, so far so good." By inquiring about the employee she recommends, Samantha guards her own reputation as well as that of the employee.

Because contacts' reputations suffer from bad referrals, contacts also need to engage in reputation repair. Ivania Quintero, 57, once recommended a young woman, who was the daughter of her mother's friend, for a cleaning job. Shortly thereafter, the employer confronted Ivania, telling her that the worker had stopped coming to work and had stolen an expensive painting. Ivania then went to confront the worker's mother, only to learn that the worker was not living there. Ivania returned to the employer to explain that she referred the worker due to the good relationship between Ivania's family and the worker's mother, and Ivania did not know that the worker would succumb to the temptation to steal. By explaining herself to the employer – and the interviewer – Ivania is trying to repair her reputation. She insisted that she takes referrals seriously and that she learned a valuable lesson from this episode.

A compromised reputation may be reparable, depending on the nature of the employee's transgression. Karl Santos, 43, used to work in an auto shop changing tires on buses and trucks. He said he was fired after what he called a "foolish" mistake. One day a client arrived to have the tires changed on a truck; the client worked as a driver for a religious NGO, which owned the truck. "[The tires] were bald," Karl recalled, so the driver replaced all four. Karl asked the driver what they planned to do with the old tires and was told they would be thrown away. Knowing he could sell the old tires to people who recycle them, Karl asked the driver, "Why don't you give me a couple of them?" The driver gave him all four, saying "If they ask for them, I'll tell them I threw them away because they already know that shit is worthless." Karl sold the tires. Three days later, the driver returned and asked for the older tires because his supervisors at the NGO had demanded that he return them. When he learned that Karl had sold them already, the NGO supervisor spoke with Karl's supervisor. "He said how was it possible that they were

letting me sell tires there…so because of that problem they removed me [from the job]." Being fired is a serious stain on one's record, so one would think that this episode would have serious repercussions for Karl's employability. But Karl found another job soon after, and he even returned to work at the same shop later. This is because he was able to frame the episode as a misunderstanding and a lapse in judgement. After all, Karl did not steal from the employer or from the client; he asked for the tires because he thought they were going to be discarded, and they were given to him. In a setting like this, with poverty and underemployment all around, people cannot be blamed for trying to get ahead, as long as they are not victimizing others. The employer was pressured to fire Karl in order to placate the angry client, whose business the employer did not want to lose. But Karl's reputation sustained no long-term damage.

Karl's telling the story during the interview reflects a crucial dimension of the reputation game – job seekers must get their side of the story out, in order to frame events in the most flattering light possible. This means bringing up negative events in conversation, rather than ignoring them. For our interview, Karl need not have mentioned being fired. As I was not going to interview his employers or associates, I would not have known about it otherwise. But Karl is embedded in a dense network that is rooted in his neighborhood and city; people talk, and he knows it. As I listened to stories like Karl's, I realized they sounded as though they had been told before, on other occasions – probably because they have. Karl told me the story not because he did not care about the impression he made but precisely because he wanted to make a good one; framing the incident as an honest mistake removes the shameful stain of impropriety. He tells the story because he knows there is a nonzero chance the listener will hear it from someone

else. Though he cannot fully control the listener's interpretations, there is much he can do to influence the impression he makes.

Getting a referral

Donald Castillo is a soft-spoken 25-year-old who works odd jobs as an electrician. He finds clients through his wife, who is a hairdresser, and through members of his Evangelical church. Donald said he does not attempt to approach people he does not know well, because they will not allow him to work in their houses. While working in her salon, Donald's wife talks to her customers about her husband who can repair appliances and fix damaged wiring. And Donald's clients, if satisfied with his work, refer him to their family and friends. Donald's referral network began with one church member and has grown to encompass his wife, his wife's family, other church members, and former clients.

Miguel Morales is a 52-year-old day laborer who earns a living doing odd jobs. If he relied solely on friends and family for work, he would not be able to earn enough to survive. But Miguel has a network of clients that spans several neighborhoods across León. Miguel does not meet new clients in organizational settings such as clubs or churches. Instead, he acquires new clients when existing clients recommend him to those in their networks. Once he has a new client, however, Miguel said he must live up to his reputation. "Of course, once I am dealing with the new person I do not know, I try to do my job better, present my honor, and that way I stay with that client working stably." Clients looking for a worker seek Miguel out, but Miguel does not always wait for this to happen. To maintain his client relationships, he also occasionally visits them. These visits are ostensibly social, but they also serve the purpose of

demonstrating Miguel's interest in finding work and keeping the connection going; they contribute to his reputation as hardworking and personable.

If it is the contact's influence with the employer that makes the contact's referral valuable, then it is also the relationship between the employer and contact that makes referrals risky. A worker who has a good reputation at work is one who enjoys some influence. If she makes a bad referral, however, her own reputation is diminished, and so is her ability to make referrals in the future. In interview after interview, respondents emphasized that they did not give referrals lightly because they did not want to "look bad" in the eyes of employers. Antonia Centeno, a 58-year-old domestic worker, boasted during her interview about her good reputation, and she acknowledges that the referrals she gives to job seekers affects her own reputation: "I tell them, 'don't make me look bad.' [They say] 'No, no, because I don't want to have a bad reputation.'" Even when contacts were not employed in the same workplace where the job-seeker is applying, contacts protected their reputations by giving recommendations carefully. Oscar serves as a reference for young job seekers in his neighborhood who ask him for help. He says he provides recommendations because he knows them: "He is not a lazybones, is not a thief, is not anything, so you recommend him. But if he is a delinquent, who is going to recommend him? For what? To look bad?"

Contacts stake their reputations on referrals and worry that a bad referral will cause them to "look bad" in front of employers – *quedar mal*, in Spanish parlance. Rolando Flores, a 21-year-old disc jockey who performs in nightclubs around León, recommended an acquaintance for a restaurant job. When the worker missed work for two weeks, the employer confronted Rolando. "The owner of the business told me, 'look what happened to me for accepting him.' [I

said:] 'Forgive me, I did not know he was going to do that.'" Other respondents shared similar experiences of referrals gone wrong, and some recalled times that employers tried to hold contacts responsible for property that was damaged or stolen by a referred worker. Given the high stakes, contacts carefully consider the referrals they make. Esther is a 50-year-old who lives near the export-zone factory and takes in laundry for a living. Because she is well-known in her community, job-seekers often approach her for referrals.

> I lived on the block for 17 years, imagine, who doesn't know me? So people tell me, 'look when you hear that someone is looking for an employee, I am unemployed'...if I see that someone tells me [they need work] but they are going to make me look bad…then no. I say, Lord, forgive me but I am not going to recommend that person because they make you look bad.

If contacts could provide referrals without concern for the consequences, there would be no reason to deny referrals to job seekers with questionable reputations. But employers confront contacts about bad referrals. Karl Santos, a 43-year-old mechanic, once recommended two younger men to his employer. When they were both fired for poor performance it reflected poorly on Karl, who said he would never help them find work again. "I am not going to say [I'll help them] again. That would be to fall back again into the same error. No need to repeat that…They made me look bad so no, I couldn't do it." Not only would Karl not help them, he said, but if an employer asked Karl about them, "I would tell them the truth, because I think if I say things that aren't [true], if I tell lies about them…even if it's not a recommendation, later [employers] are going to say to me…'He turned out to be shameless, he turned out irresponsible,' etcetera. No, better to tell them [the truth]." Contacts are deterred from lying

about job seekers by employers who hold them accountable. When referrals turn out well, contacts enhance their own reputations and experience the satisfaction of doing a favor for two people at once. Alejandra Quintero, a 63-year-old retired cook, was asked by a family she knew to help them find a domestic worker; Alejandra referred one of her neighbors. The employer and employee were satisfied with the match, Alejandra said, and they both thanked her for her help. Alejandra smiled as she related the incident during the interview.

The force of reputation extends beyond job referrals; even employers who hire without referrals seek out information about job seekers. The export-zone factory is widely considered to be one of the major low-wage employers in León. Job-seekers do not need a referral from an employee or a contact in management to obtain a job there, as in other large organizations, but the company has a policy of checking the references of applicants. Not only does the company contact the references provided by applicants, but according to respondents like Elias Valverde, a 40-year-old who worked as a driver for the factory, "the company sends people…to investigate" applicants by asking neighbors about their reputations. When applying for jobs, job seekers provide references who will speak well of them, but such assessments may be misleading. Therefore, shrewd employers approach others as well, seeking an unfiltered perspective of the candidate. This practice encourages job-seekers to maintain good relations with neighbors and to mind their reputations. Some respondents whose applications were unsuccessful wondered aloud whether their failure to obtain work at the factory was related to these investigations. Did a neighbor say something negative about the applicant? Neither the employer nor the neighbor would tell, so an applicant has no way of knowing; all she can do is wonder. This system also advantages applicants who have resided in their neighborhoods longer and whose parents have

good relations with neighbors. When young people apply for jobs, neighbors often know their parents better, so their statements about the applicant are informed by their experiences of the parents rather than the applicant herself. Residents provide positive references for young neighbors whose parents they know well.

The importance of reputation in this context serves to coordinate the interests of job-seekers and contacts. Contacts care about job-seekers' reputations to the degree that they care about their own because referring an employee who turns out to be untrustworthy or unreliable reflects poorly on the contact and affects his own reputation. Andres was working as a fireguard for a major processing plant when his friend Ernesto asked him for help getting a job at the plant. "I had the opportunity to hook him up in the job where I was working," he said. Andres hesitated, however, because he knew Ernesto was considering another job offer that had not been confirmed. Andres was not willing to refer his friend to his own company until he was certain that Ernesto would turn down the other job:

> I told him, "I don't want you to take this job and resign in two months"…because he didn't have the other job secured yet, but he was waiting. But I told him, "if you are going to choose this job, you are not going to leave in two months, one month, when they give you the other one because you are looking bad in a company and it is a big company, a serious company, it is not a little shop, it's not a thing like that. It is a company and you can't play like that." The responsibility is always there.

Andres made it clear to Ernesto that taking one job while waiting to find out about the other was not an option because *both* their reputations were at stake. Andres let his friend

Ernesto know that accepting the job referral would create the obligation of an exchange – in return for the assistance, contacts expect job-seekers to perform well once hired. Quitting a job to find better pay or hours might be acceptable for the smallest employers in León, who understand that they can offer their employees little in the way of security and benefits, but a referral for a job at a big company is a valuable resource that should not be squandered. Quitting such a job after a short time would make Ernesto appear irresponsible, and it would tarnish Andres's reputation by association.

By guarding their reputations, contacts protect their future employment prospects as well as their credibility for giving referrals in the future. Aura Mendez, a 34-year-old factory worker, explained that if a contact makes a bad referral, "they [employers] don't look for you anymore. They don't ask you anymore, 'do you know this person?' Or, 'Do you know someone who is looking for work?'…They don't tell you anymore [about job opportunities], you don't find out, maybe to do a favor to someone else who could be served by the job...People don't trust you like before." In a context where exchange relationships are important but economic resources are scarce, the ability to share job information and influence employers is valuable. Just as workers cultivate positive reputations to obtain referrals, contacts protect their reputations in order to give referrals.

The worthy worker

What is good reputation? What does it mean to be worthy of a low-wage job? Employers, contacts, and workers consistently described an idealized image of a "worthy worker," as well as the mirror image of an "unworthy worker." Worthy and unworthy workers are described in

moral terms, as either "healthy" or full of "vice." The worthy worker is not a thief, is free of vice, likes to work, and truly needs a job; in contrast, the unworthy worker steals, abuses alcohol and drugs, is unreliable, and does not take work seriously. Competence and skill do matter to a degree; for example, drivers must have licenses and cooks need to have culinary abilities. But in the low-wage labor market, greater emphasis is placed on other, less tangible aspects of worthiness. Thus, for job-seekers playing the reputation game means asserting not only that she is trustworthy but also that she has no vice, likes to work, and truly needs work.

"Not a thief"

When asked about the factors they take into consideration when deciding whether to share a job lead, respondents emphasized a reputation for trustworthiness as most important; in this context, they refer specifically to a job seeker's history of theft, or lack thereof.

Antonia Centeno, a 58-year-old domestic worker, speaks of her reputation with pride: "Honesty is valued everywhere. Look how many years I have been working…I have never been fired for being a thief." Workers of all ages and occupations emphasized the importance of a trustworthy reputation and expressed concern about stealing. Aura Mendez, a 34-year-old factory worker, said, "You have to know who you can recommend and who you can't because it depends on the person. Because if you know that person very well and you know that that person is not going to make you look bad on the job, you recommend her. But sometimes there are people you cannot recommend." When asked to describe someone who does not deserve a referral, Aura said,

> By the behavior of the person, let's say. If I know someone and I know that she does not like to work or that she likes to take other people's things, then no. Why? Because she can go steal from the boss and then you're going to look bad because afterward the boss is going to say to you, "You see, this person is not a good worker."

"Has no vice"

In addition to trustworthiness, respondents emphasized a lack of vice as being essential for employability. In this context, "vice" refers to drinking alcohol excessively, doing drugs, smoking cigarettes, gambling, and womanizing. Given that the interview itself was an opportunity for reputation cultivation and therefore subject to intense impression management, respondents often made unprompted statements regarding their aversion to vice. Joaquin Solis, a 48-year-old who works for the city, said, "I have not been a lost boy, drinker, with corruptions of vice. I have been very centered and at the same time I am not a corrupt man. I am a working man, a fighter." Lorenzo Peralta, a 55-year-old security guard, said that his sons, like himself, were free of vice: "I never gave my mom problems with drugs, with none of that…Now I have my sons here with me...They are not wicked or anything." Some respondents distanced themselves from fathers or brothers who were known for vice.

Nacho Cortez, a 64-year-old retired driver, explained how trustworthiness is tied to one's freedom from vice:

> Well, here one can gain people's confidence when one is not a drunk. I do not touch other people's things…and I give you the intention that I respect you. I do

not try to harm you. You say, "This man is not a thief, I can trust him. This man is not a drunk, I can trust him. He does not have the vice of drugs."

Respondents agreed that drinking is a problem because it interferes with an employee's reliability. Excessive drinking can get a worker fired. Wilson, who owns a bakery, employs six workers. He acknowledges that the wages he offers are low and he said that several of his former employees had a drinking problem. Wilson said he once fired a worker because "the liquor grabbed him, and he started to arrive [at work] drunk, some days he came [to work] and other days he did not. He missed a week and that…is not good…so we had to fire him."

Excessive drinking can also prevent a job seeker from finding future work. Adan Contreras, a 42-year-old security guard, said that he drank a lot during his younger years, and it affected his employment prospects.

> Logically, that affects you because who is going to want a person who only lives drinking?...So that affects you, and if I wanted to [to go to work] I went, but in a more serious job, people want you there daily, they want you there early, in good presentation, in good form. And to arrive with alcohol on your breath or falling down…they don't give you work.

As discussed above, drinking alcohol can lead to a job seeker being labeled unworthy of work. Therefore, those who do drink must take pains to protect their work reputations from contamination. Nacho, the retired driver mentioned earlier, admitted that he drinks alcohol, but he explained that it does not affect his work reputation because his drinking does not impede his ability to work:

> Everyone knows each other here...They knew that I take my drinks but very little. A little while ago I was working at [the university] and there we work from Monday to Friday…So on Friday I buy my little bottle of liquor and I drink it. But if the boss tells me [I need to work the next day], well then I don't drink…Because it is horrible, for me I feel it is horrible to smoke and drink liquor and arrive [at work] the next day and talk to you close up with that stink. No.

Other workers who drink alcohol were careful to distance themselves from "irresponsible" drinkers. Karl Santos, a 43-year-old mechanic, recalled that when he was younger he learned that a hangover was not a valid reason to stay home from work.

> I always went to work, and my mom always inculcated in me that one should be responsible. She would tell me that no one sent me to go drinking. If afterward I was going to spend the morning in bed because I did not want to go to work [she would say] "No, boy, let's go! Go to your job." So thank God my mom in that respect inculcated that in us…I got up unwillingly but I got up...I always went to my job…I am a good worker, I think of myself as a good worker and responsible.

Again, Karl is taking control of the narrative by acknowledging that he drinks, but insisting that is does not affect his work performance. Contacts in possession of job information consider a job seeker's reputation for "vice." When Emilio Sanchez, 21, left a job to take a better one, he helped a friend get hired as his replacement. They had become friends while taking a class together. Emilio said he decided to help his former classmate because "he is a person who does not have any vice. He does not take [drugs], he does not drink. He does not smoke, nothing. He is a serious person…He does his job well and is very responsible." Emilio did not

have any prior experience working alongside the friend, but for Emilio a lack of vice was evidence enough of his friend's worthiness of a job.

Contacts divert job opportunities away from problem drinkers because their own reputation may suffer. Rolando Flores is a 21-year-old DJ who plays in bars and restaurants. Due to his connections with the owners of the establishments, he has helped job seekers find work. One referral, though, went badly for Rolando: "One time I recommended someone [and] he missed two weeks [of work] because the poor man drank quite a lot of liquor…he arrived at work asking them to forgive him, but they told him no." Afterward the employer called Rolando and chastised him: "Look what happened to me for accepting him." Rolando had to apologize. "Forgive me, I didn't know he was going to do that." Now, Rolando said, he is careful to avoid giving referrals to job seekers known for "vice."

Certainly, alcohol and drugs can interfere with work, if they provoke tardiness, absenteeism, or poor performance. But respondents also cited smoking, gambling, and womanizing as "vices" that render a job-seeker unworthy, even though these do not directly interfere with job performance per se. For example, Adan Contreras, the 42-year-old who used to work with his brother installing air conditioner systems, said his brother lost his job because he was a "womanizer":

> Another thing that influenced my brother losing that job…my brother has a problem that he is very much a womanizer. He is very much a womanizer and of course since he earned good money, he was able to be involved in those things… The kid was responsible but since he was a womanizer he was losing those clients.

This suggests that for network contacts "vice" is not just a signal of a job-seeker's performance but also of his or her moral fortitude. Even if the brother's job loss was actually due to a poor economy, the fact that Adan attributes the brother's misfortune to his personal behavior reveals – and reinforces – the image of the worthy worker. In a labor market where so many people need income, giving a job opportunity to people who misspend their wages on vices rather than feeding their families feels like a waste of resources.

For most respondents, drinking was seen primarily as a problem among men, not women. Only one respondent expressed concern about female job seekers being "drunks," but even then he was speaking in a general sense, not about anyone specific. For male job-seekers, drinking alcohol presents a difficult choice: on one hand, drinking is a way for men to socialize, blow off steam, express emotions that are normally repressed, and deepen friendships (Lomnitz 2014 [1977]). So foregoing drinking altogether may lead one to be seen by others as unsociable or sanctimonious. On the other hand, being seen drinking by others can make the wrong impression. It is little wonder, then, that respondents took care to explain their drinking and draw boundaries between themselves and irresponsible drinkers.

"Likes to work"

Though trustworthiness and freedom from vice are the most important elements of a good reputation, employers and contacts said they also look for job seekers who "like to work" – who demonstrate a strong work ethic, regardless of working conditions. Employers and distant contacts are not the only ones who assess a job seeker's worthiness in these terms; respondents provided clear-eyed and occasionally harsh assessments of their friends and family members.

Justina Rivas, a 48-year-old care worker, described her 31-year-old son in unflattering terms as someone who "does not like to work."

Esther Cardoza, 50, makes a living doing laundry for others, an occupation that allows her to care for her disabled daughter. Because she is a longtime resident of her neighborhood, young job seekers often ask her for recommendations. Esther said she gives referrals to people who appear to be energetic and active: "When the person, as we say in Nicaragua, 'has their batteries in.' You know what I mean? But these days there are people who go around looking for work and they are sitting there watching television and want to be paid well." How does a person demonstrate an energetic work ethic? Esther said she rises early in the morning to work or run errands, and she makes sure her neighbors see her: "If I go out at five in the morning, I am greeting my neighbors, 'Good morning! How are you?'" For respondents, staying at home generates the impression that the person is not interested in working, whereas being out and about in the community is a sign of worthiness.

When giving job referrals, contacts look for job seekers who like to work. Wilma Lario, a 28-year-old who works in a peanut processing facility, has helped other women to obtain jobs. "I have brought them personally [to the employer] because I know they are trustworthy and I know they are responsible girls in their work tasks…I have known them for years and I know they are hardworking women and that they love work." Carmen Munguia, a self-employed 30-year-old, said she has recommended some of her neighbors for jobs because "they are peaceful neighbors, not problematic, and they like work. That's how it is."

Although the discourse of liking work was more prominent among female workers and contacts, men also expressed concern about the work ethic of job seekers. Jesus Valerio, 27,

works as a driver for his uncle's bakery. He has helped others get hired at the bakery, and he considers the job seeker's reputation: "People talk, and maybe it is for a reason." He said he denied a referral to a job seeker who had a negative reputation.

> A girl came to me to see if [the bakery] needed someone to clean…I told her no...Maybe the business did need her, but I told her no because she was a girl who liked to go in to work a few days and already she was leaving. So I had observed her, and people had commented to me about her that she liked to work only a few days and afterward she did not work, I do not know why…when you get a job and you have need you have to appreciate it, but those people seem like they do not like to work, they only like to be supported."

Jesus said he also denied a referral to a man for the same reasons:

> I did not want to risk it, because I knew him. He is a neighbor too...It was like he liked to work, [then] he wasn't working. Some days he worked, some days he didn't, so I say that entrusting [a referral to] people like that is not a good thing because the only place it gets you is that your boss says to you, "Look, you only recommended this lazy person."

This statement by Jesus illustrates something important about reputation in the low-wage labor market – for many contacts, the default expectation is that job seekers are unworthy; thus, they must actively prove their worthiness. In this case, Jesus was unsure of his neighbors' work ethic, but the neighbors failed to obtain referrals because they did not overcome Jesus's doubts.

Juan Urena is a 21-year-old mason who is part of a referral network composed of neighbors and friends who help one another find construction jobs. Job-seekers whose work ethic is suspect are excluded from these referral networks. Juan explained,

> In the neighborhood there are people who, you don't worry so much about [helping] them for the reason that they are not devoted to the job and they are irresponsible. You don't make them a priority because…afterward he looks bad and my boss says, "You brought me someone who doesn't work." The people we help are responsible people and with a desire to work. We give priority to these people.

For workers in project-based occupations like construction, referral networks help them to manage the uncertainty and insecurity. But a job seeker's ability to obtain referrals depends on others' perceptions of his enthusiasm for work. Given the importance of an enthusiastic attitude toward work, many respondents emphasized this characteristic during their interviews. Victoria Narvaez, 55, earns a living by taking in laundry. She said that by cultivating a reputation as a person "who likes to work," she has developed a clientele that enables her to earn enough to survive. Like some of the other workers I interviewed, Victoria spoke of herself in the third person, as though imitating a conversation between employers: "She will leave your clothes well washed and well ironed." Notably, respondents were not asked directly about their attitudes toward work during interviews; rather, they volunteered this information in the context of answering other questions. Sara Gomez, an unemployed 25-year-old, said, "I like to work. Thank God I have always liked it because there are people who…do not like it. They throw the job away and I see that as wrong." For Sara, such people do not deserve help finding work. Sara

said that her younger sister, who is a student, "likes work too...Thank God my mom taught us to depend on ourselves and get ahead." Georgina Espinoza, a 41-year-old domestic worker, also described herself as "enthusiastic" about working.

The work ethic is described as a positive attitude toward work in general, rather than a disposition toward hard work per se. No one called themselves a *hard* worker, or bragged about the long hours they worked. Some respondents talked about doing their work diligently, or occasionally performing tasks outside the scope of their responsibilities (for example, domestic workers who wash dishes in addition to doing laundry). They talked about obeying employers, but not taking abuse. The absence of hard work as a discourse may reflect the fact that, in this labor market, the hours are already long, the labor usually physical, and the wages low. The work itself is hard, so it goes without saying that the people who do it work hard. Another interpretation is that, for these workers, trying to compete by working harder than everyone else is a losing proposition, individually and collectively: one might gain a favorable reputation by putting in longer hours or exerting oneself more strenuously, but in the process employers would raise their expectations of all workers, which would leave all workers worse off. Workers must cultivate positive reputations, but they also must ensure that employers maintain reasonable expectations; as it is, many workers asserted that employer expectations are unreasonably high.

"Truly needs work"

A job seeker's worthiness is also bound up with his or her level of need. One might assume that anyone who seeks a low-wage job needs the income – after all, who does this work

for fun? – but in the eyes of respondents, those who deserve job leads are those who need the work the most.

Low-wage employers recognize that finding reliable employees often means hiring workers for whom "necessity is too strong" to quit. Celia runs a small business selling street food and hires assistants to help her. Given the physical demands of the work – standing outside in the sun and rain, tending a scorching fire, scrubbing pots – and the low wages, Celia only accepts job-seekers who have a need for work. She said she has little employee turnover because she hires older women who truly need the income, however small. She said it is difficult to recruit younger workers because "nowadays the youth do not like to work. They work for a while, they like it only for a week and later they withdraw because they don't like to work under the sun, they don't like the rain."

Needing work often means having mouths to feed. Thus, when dispensing job opportunities employers and contacts favor those with children or parents to support because they believe such workers are more likely to act responsibly. Omar manages a hotel in León's tourist district. He said that over the years he has learned to hire only those who truly need work. Although asking whether an applicant has children is not part of the hotel chain's official interview checklist, Omar sees this information as relevant to his hiring decisions. "I would not hire anyone who does not need the employment. I hire a woman or a man or a person for a certain job who has kids…I would not hire a young person or a person who does not have so much responsibility and who can eat whether they are working or not working."

Job seekers know that their economic need is part of the equation, so they emphasize this in their interactions. Reyna Uribe is a retired 66-year-old. Years ago, when her children were

small, Reyna set out to find domestic work. When she approached a prospective employer, the woman asked Reyna where she lived and why she was seeking work. "I told her…I had children, I was a single mother, so I told her I was a single mother, that I had children and needed to work." Although Reyna had arrived at the employer's door without a referral, her status as a single mother helped to convince the employer that Reyna was serious about needing a job.

For contacts, giving referrals to those who need work most is a way to reduce their risk. Marvin Baez, 30, works at a private hospital. He said he helped his neighbor obtain work at the hospital because he knew the neighbor had a wife and child to support. "I was sure that he was not going to make me look bad…because the truth is he needed that job."

Wilma Lario, the 28-year-old mentioned above, works for a peanut processing company. Her employer often recruits young men to load sacks onto trucks, but Wilma regards this work as too demanding for "spoiled" young men.

> They are people who are not altogether interested [in working] because they say they are supported by their parents, their grandparents, their siblings. What would they want work for? Recommending a person like that [is a bad idea] because they are only going to go one or two days, then once they see how they are going to be treated, or how they are going to be received, then they are not going to measure up at all in a job.

Given the harsh realities of low-wage work, only those who have no other means of support deserve a job in the eyes of contacts and employers. Although job seekers without children generally are viewed by contacts and employers as less deserving of work, in some cases childless job-seekers can overcome these concerns and convince employers to hire them.

When Angela Zelaya, 24, was a young girl, she approached the owner of a small corner store and asked for a job. When the employers asked her "what were my motives for working," Angela replied that "my mother did not have many possibilities to send us to study, that I wanted to help her." Angela's wanting to alleviate her mother's financial burden was accepted by the employer as a valid reason for a young girl to seek work; Angela was hired, and she went to work in the store after school each day. Other respondents told similar stories of obtaining work as children or teenagers in order to lighten their parents' burden and obtain money for books, school supplies, and clothes.

Given the way that job-seekers declared their honor and worthiness, one might expect the employers' language to be similar. However, the employers interviewed for this study did not use such honor-based language. They did not acknowledge or recognize their employees' honor. For them, all that matters is that the worker knows what to do and will not steal. This helps explain why trustworthiness is such an important theme for both employers and job-seekers. But the other criteria – no vice, needs work – matter more to contacts than employers, because they affect the worker's performance in ways that will reflect upon the contact. That is, employers were less cognizant of the reputation-building efforts of job seekers and contacts, even though employers benefit directly from the system of social control provided by the reputation game.

In his classic study of Magrhibi traders, Greif (1989) identifies two mechanisms through which agents, whom are entrusted by merchants to travel with valuable merchandise, develop trustworthy reputations:

> The first enables an agent to signal that he is trustworthy because he fears God, or has internalized an ideology of honesty. The second mechanism enables an agent

> to establish ex ante that his most profitable course ex post is to be honest. This mechanism allows an agent credibly to commit himself ex ante to be honest ex post. The merchant can thus trust the agent – the agent possesses a reputation as honest agent (p. 867)

In León, job-seekers stress that they have internalized the language of the worthy worker and the moral weight it carries. This is the first mechanism of reputation. While such statements are important, employers and contacts recognize that they may amount to mere performances, or "cheap talk." This is where the second mechanism comes into play – employers can tempt the worker to steal, in order to test his trustworthiness and see if his declarations of honesty are sincere; or, if the employer or the contact knows where the job-seeker lives, such knowledge provides assurance that the job-seeker cannot simply disappear. The first mechanism, which is performative, generates a trust based on the belief that the job-seeker possesses the correct values and attitude. The second mechanism, which is structural, generates a trust based on the knowledge that the job-seeker has more to gain from honesty and more to lose from dishonesty. Both are part of the reputation game.

Networking as a constant

In addition to cultivating a positive reputation, job-seekers in León also must cultivate referral networks. In this context, networking[6] is not something that happens at receptions, during power lunches or over cups of coffee; rather, networking and reputation-building in the low-wage labor

[6] There is no native concept of "networking" in Latin America, though people obtain a wide array of key resources through network connections (Lomnitz 1977, Espinoza 1999).

market of León is an ongoing process that is woven into the fabric of daily life. People meet, they get to know each other (or they grow up together), and they form opinions about one another. Somewhere down the line, these relationships may produce job leads. Job-seekers don't know which contacts will prove helpful so workers emphasize the importance of being friendly and demonstrating "good behavior."

One never knows when a network contact might produce a job. Elias Valverde, 40, lost his job at a supermarket due to personnel cuts. At the time, both of Elias's sisters were working at the export-zone factory, and they told him that the factory was seeking a driver. When Elias went to the factory's personnel office to apply, he discovered that the person who was interviewing candidates was a former schoolmate of Elias's brother-in-law. Elias had met the man many times, when he visited Elias's brother-in-law at Elias's house. Though Elias still had to follow the regular application procedure, Elias's prior connection with the hiring agent allowed Elias to "get in quickly" rather than waiting for a response. "From the friendship, he already knew who I was and everything, so he gave me the opportunity to drive there."

Elias did not form this relationship for the purpose of finding a job; he did not even form this relationship on purpose. The hiring agent was his brother-in-law's friend, and Elias happened to get to know him as well. At first blush, Elias's experience may appear to illustrate the strength-of-weak-ties hypothesis, which asserts the value of distant network ties for social mobility. However, it was not information that flowed from the agent to Elias, who already knew about the job opening; rather, the connection allowed the hiring agent to know information about Elias that he did not have about the other candidates – his reputation. If this information were negative, Elias would not have been hired. His experience illustrates how job-seekers in

León must be cognizant of their reputations even during moments when they are not actively seeking work.

In addition to looking for better job opportunities, workers in León also keep an eye out for the chance to form ties with others who might provide job leads later. Some respondents even saw the interview itself as a networking opportunity. Nancy Bernal, an unemployed 57-year-old, complained that it was impossible to obtain stable work in a company or government agency without influential connections. She told me, "Maybe when you become someone and maybe you have a project you will keep me in mind, and you'll look for me and give me work. Because I never find work." And 27-year-old Jesus Valerio, who works as a driver, made a plea for job information at the end of his interview:

> I would like to see if you know of any little jobs at the company you are working for, I don't know, or if you hear rumors that they need a chauffeur or something like that, you understand…I would like to get ahead, maybe with help, maybe you hear [about something] for the company you're working for, if they need someone there, you know I am at your service and you know we won't let you down.

The reputation game requires both the constant formation of new ties and the ongoing maintenance of existing ones. Job-seekers regularly reach out to network members, visiting their homes or calling their phones; these interactions are ostensibly social, but they also facilitate information flow. In León, constant communication is important because job openings are filled quickly. Sanchez, an unemployed 21-year-old, missed out on a job opportunity because he did not learn about the opening right away.

> I have a friend whose father is the owner of that business, and I asked her. And she told me, 'let me ask my father, but I realized recently that they were looking for people. That is, I did not know you were looking…Go try to submit papers, but you are late because there are people who already managed to submit papers.'

Emilio went to apply, but someone else already had been hired. Sol Mendoza, 29, also missed out on a job opportunity; she heard from a friend that one of the market vendors was seeking an assistant, but when Sol went to the market to find the vendor, she discovered that the job had been taken. This is the element of chance in job referral networks: Network members tend to give job information to the first (worthy) job-seeker who asks for it, and the sharing of job information often happens during chance encounters in public or during social visits. In order to find out about job opportunities in a timely manner, therefore, job seekers must visit or call their contacts regularly to check for updates.

Once they decide to hire, employers spread the word to employees and network members; those who hear about the position but are not interested in it for themselves will pass the lead along to others. Those who have job leads can either wait for job seekers to approach them, or they can casually ask network members about their work status to gauge whether they are looking for work. A common pattern of interaction was reported by respondents: When friends, kin, or acquaintances encounter each other in the street or visit one another's homes, they greet each other and exchange pleasantries as well as updates about the status of their families and each person's current and recent activities. Edwin, an unemployed 22-year-old, explained, "It is very common for them to ask you, 'are you working? Are you studying?' So now that is very common. So for that reason if I am working I tell you about it, if I'm working at

X,Y job. If I'm not working I explain the reason, because each person has their reasons for not working or not looking for work." These casual conversations give job-seekers the opportunity to express their desire to find work, and if the listeners have job leads and deem the job seekers worthy, they can mention the job.

Conclusion

In the reputation game, employers and contacts decide who is worthy of low-wage employment; moreover, their criteria are neither arbitrary nor highly personalized. Rather, taken together their statements and actions construct an idealized image of a worthy worker – one who does not steal, who is free is vice, who likes to work, and who truly needs work. These are the elements that comprise a worker's reputation, and they map unevenly onto a job seeker's age, gender, and parenthood status. The idealized image of the worthy worker exerts both a moral power and a material one. It is little wonder, then, that workers and job seekers took pains to describe themselves in these terms during their interviews. An individual's efforts to establish a respectable reputation is a self-interested move, but it is also, Goffman (1973[1959], p. 13) asserts, a "moral" one:

> Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second [one], namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an

> implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect.

Thus, reputations have a moral character that cut both ways, implying demands on workers to demonstrate their worthiness and demands on contacts and employers to reward 'worthy' job seekers with job opportunities. Actors are strategic, but they also have an acute sense of fairness: "As performers we are merchants of morality" (Goffman 1973 [1959], p. 251). Recent studies have confirmed that making moral judgements transforms actors' self-perceptions and behavior; they see themselves as more moral and act more trustworthy. Moreover, third-party observers view those who make moral judgements as more trustworthy (Simpson, Harrell, and Willer 2013). In environments where economic success over the longer term depends upon trustworthiness, self-interest and morality fuse to create a powerful means of control. The idealized image of the worthy worker exerts both a material and moral influence over workers and job seekers in León.

Meanings shape behavior, and behavior shapes social structure (Singelmann 1972). Continued interaction gives rise to stable positions as actors examine and respond to cues from exchange partners. From these patterns of interaction and exchange arise institutions, which serve as mechanisms of social control (Singelmann 1972, p. 419). According to Goffman, players restrain themselves from cheating either because they want to avoid the shame that accompanies breaking a social norm, or because they know a bad reputation will affect their ability to 'play the game' in the future (1969, p. 124). Workers and job seekers have concrete

material reasons for caring about reputation – future employability – but over time they internalize the values expressed in these discourses. The combination of external pressure and internalized morality exerts a greater level of social control than either could alone. People seem to use moral speech more when talking about referrals in the general, hypothetical sense, whereas when discussing actual job referrals, they emphasized the job-seeker's need for work, his experience, or his relationship to the contact or employer. Likewise, when people talk about the archetype of the undeserving job seeker, they use extreme examples of "vagabonds," "delinquents," and "thieves." This suggests that people recognize that the worthy worker and unworthy worker are not actual people, but rather one-dimensional characters next to whom everyone else is judged and evaluated.

Any study of the allocation of resources is, ultimately, a study of what Goffman memorably calls "the varied and skittish workings of informal social control" (1969, p. 136). When resources are allocated by state agencies, would-be recipients are subject to claims around their 'deservingness.' Similarly, when resources are allocated by networks, those who depend upon the resources must be deemed worthy to receive them. How worthiness is determined by network members depends upon the nature of their relationship to recipients as well as the positions of the actors within the wider society. For example, important resources are allocated to children by their parents, and children are not expected – at least at early ages – to demonstrate their worthiness of these resources. However, being labeled unworthy can get an adult child written out of a parent's will or excluded from inheriting the family business. Such control is not only normative but also material: Valuable resources are at stake. To the degree that the effectiveness of these performances is a factor in the decision-making of contacts and

employers, the high value of reputation in the low wage labor market serves the purpose of ensuring social control. In a context where formal institutions have less bearing on individuals' actions, the informal mechanism of social control serves the interest of employers and contacts, who rely on social control conferred by referrals to ensure adequate worker performance.

Though subject to social control, people do not passively acquiesce to it. Rather, they maneuver as best they can within their environment to strategically achieve goals, and they mobilize shared meanings toward their own ends. If successful network mobilization depends upon one's ability to demonstrate their worthiness of assistance, over time this networking activity and the performances that accompany it can become constitutive of one's sense of self (McLean 2007). Although McLean frames his study of Renaissance Florence as one of network formation, it can also be seen as a study of reputation-building; patronage-seeking letter-writers asserted their *honore* – their worthiness of the office they sought – and mobilized recommendations from others (McLean 2007). Six hundred years later and six thousand miles away, job-seekers in León assiduously make similar claims. They even deploy the terms "*honor*" and "*patrón*," though they have different meanings in this context – a "*patrón*" is an employer and "*honor*" is an assertion that the worker will not steal or deceive. Like the office-seekers of Florence, though, these statements by the low-wage job-seekers of León have the same underlying message: "I know you don't have to help me, but you should because I am worthy."

Job search games reflect practical strategies for solving a problem, but they become part of the players' personalities and identities. In Lane's study (2011) of tech workers, job-seekers are forced to network constantly and pore over their application materials, and eventually they

see themselves as a "company of one," priding themselves on being different from the "organization man" of the 20th century, who can't adapt to the 21st century reality of flexible work. It is doubtful that these tech workers thought this way before experiencing job loss and job search in this occupation, but their search behavior is accompanied by meaning-making efforts as job-seekers try to make sense of their experiences and actions. Likewise, job-seekers in León assert their worthiness in order to cultivate a reputation and obtain work; these statements reflect their efforts to make sense of the low-wage labor market and their position within it.

Chapter 4: Relational Work in Referral Networks

The preceding chapters describe the low-wage labor market of the city of León, Nicaragua, and argue that its features – informality, insecurity, low wages, lack of surveillance, and lack of credentials – create vulnerabilities for employers and workers, thereby generating a need for trust between them. This need for trust leads to two phenomena – an emphasis on the job-seeker's trustworthiness and the use of referrals for recruiting workers. Thus, job-seekers engage in a reputation game in which they cultivate positive reputations while building and mobilizing networks.

Most studies of job searching use surveys of workers to examine how jobs were found. These survey data may include the type of tie that provided assistance to the job-seeker (see Elliott and Sims 2001), but they generally do not contain information about the relationship between the contact and the employer. In single-employer studies of referrals, the contact is always an employee of the firm (see Marin 2012, Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo 2006, Fernandez et al 2000). While most studies examine either the job-seekers, the contacts, or the employers, this study includes all three, across a wide spectrum of low-wage occupations. Leveraging a dataset of 956 job searches from a nonrandom sample of 105 respondents, this chapter analyzes the structure of referral networks and shows how job-seekers, contacts, and

employers all engage in the delicate business of relational work as they navigate their social relationships and their economic interests.

The structure of job search networks

This section draws from a dataset of 956 job searches. (See Tables 2-12 in Appendix C). Interviewees in this study were asked about jobs they had held in the past, jobs they had applied for but not obtained, and jobs that were offered to them but they refused. Interviewees were also asked about times they had helped others, and times they had been approached for help but had denied it. Interview transcripts were coded both qualitatively and quantitatively; the unit of analysis of the quantitative data is searches, rather than jobs or individuals, because the data contained failed searches as well as successful ones, and the data include the respondent as a job-seeker, a contact, or in some cases, an employer.

Respondents reported an average of 6.9 searches as job-seekers and an average of 1.9 searches as contacts. Eleven respondents reported employing someone else at least once. Put another way, the respondent was the job-seeker in 76 percent (731) of the searches, the respondent was the contact in 21 percent (204) of the searches, and the employer in 2 percent (21) of the searches.[7] Of the 956 searches reported, 53 percent (508) involved a referral to the employer, while 17 percent (162) involved the employer hiring a job-seeker in her network.

[7] Job searches may be undercounted, if respondents leave out jobs that were worked for only a very short time, or if they forgot to report jobs to which they applied unsuccessfully. However, respondents' recall of job history seemed to be very reliable, and respondents were prompted at the end of the interview to review the history of jobs for missing searches. The number of job-seekers helped also is likely to be under-counted, because respondents may not remember every person they have given job-finding assistance to, nor every person to whom they have denied assistance. More casual forms of assistance, such as telling a job-seeker about a "help wanted" sign they saw, are more likely to be under-reported than referrals. What is of most interest here are referrals, since respondents stressed the importance of these for finding work in León. In sum, these data, while likely incomplete, are nevertheless illuminative.

Nine percent (84) involved job information only, without a referral. Two percent (16) involved a letter of recommendation, 18 percent (177) of searches involved no assistance, and 1 percent (9) were unknown. Thus, about 80 percent of job searches involved some form of assistance, and most involved providing or receiving a referral to the employer.

Among the seventy percent of searches that involved either a referral or hiring directly, there are three types of network structures: Dyads (two-node networks), triad (three-node networks), and four-node networks.[8] In a dyadic network structure, the employer hires a job-seeker from her own personal network. In the triadic network structure, the job-seeker receives a referral from a network contact who is connected in some way to the employer. In a four-node structure, the job-seeker is referred by a network member to another contact, who is linked to the employer. The least common type of network structure was four-node, at 7 percent of network-based searches (47), followed by the dyad, at 24 percent (162). The most common type of referral network, by far, is the triad, at 69 percent (461) of network-based searches.

Dyadic networks

Why is the dyad not more pervasive? At first blush, it would seem sensible for employers to hire directly from their own personal networks, since they have information about these job-seekers and can use social pressure to control them on the job. In fact, however, this is often not the case. Employers reported being reluctant to hire people they knew well, because intimacy with the job-seeker actually undermined control instead of enhancing it. Cesar Dominguez is a 35-year-old native of León who owns and operates a small tourism company. He is gregarious,

[8] In network parlance, "nodes" are the units of analysis that are linked in the network – in this case, individuals.

artistically minded, and speaks several languages. He said he has hired friends and family to work with him as tour guides in the past, but these days he is reluctant to do so because they "abuse" his trust and affection for them by not taking the job seriously enough. Although he sees himself more as a "team leader" than a despotic boss, Cesar said, he needs to be in charge. But asserting authority as an employer over a friend or family member can be awkward. Moreover, Cesar explained, he is often approached by friends and family for jobs, but he knows too much about them to trust them:

> Sometimes I have had to refuse the opportunity because...sometimes the person does not inspire confidence in me, and with tourism, you must trust a lot in the people with whom you work because the security of the tourist is in your hands...I will not take the risk...because it is the image of my business...Many times I have had to say, "No, no I cannot [hire you]."

Cesar's experiences demonstrate why hiring network members is fraught with the potential for conflict and misunderstanding on both sides. Recruiting one's own network members might seem like the most logical way to find trustworthy workers. But the kind of "soft" information that employers have about close intimates is a double-edged sword: It could make employers trust job-seekers more, but it could also make them trust job-seekers less. Also, it can be more difficult to assert authority over one's own friends and family members.

A closer look at dyadic network searches illustrates this further (see Table 8). Of the 162 dyadic searches, the largest share – 29 percent (47) – involved neighbors, and 17 percent (27) involved friends. Another 17 percent were "other" or unknown. In 9 percent (14) of searches, the employer was a former employer, in 8 percent the employer was an acquaintance, and in 7

percent the employers were siblings, in 7 percent the employers were cousins, and in another 7 percent the employers were aunts or uncles. These data demonstrate that, while being hired directly by a family member was not unheard of, more jobs were found through neighbors and friends.

One way to interpret this finding is that most respondents likely do not have any employers in their personal networks. Another interpretation is that working with a close family member might not be reported as a job. For example, Nicolas Gonzales is a soft-spoken 35-year-old high school graduate who, during periods of unemployment, works with his mother, who sells fish at the outdoor market in their neighborhood. He does this to help her earn money for food and utilities because he lives with her, not for a wage. While job-seekers do not expect to be paid by parents, they can expect to be paid when working for siblings. Clara Vasquez, an unemployed 40-year-old, once worked for her sister during a spell of unemployment: "I was without work. My sister, one of my sisters, decided to start an eatery...so I went with her, she told me to work with her, as the kitchen assistant. I was there for seven months."

The strong presence of neighbors among dyadic networks is partly a function of León's built environment. As discussed the first chapter, many of León's residents live with their parents and grandparents who first settled in Leon and built houses, or else they live with their spouses' families. Many of the respondents were living in the houses they grew up in, or else they had been living in their neighborhood for several years. The high level of residential stability means that neighbors get to know one another over time, allowing trust and affection to form among them. Respondents talked of neighbors they had known their entire lives, whose parents were friends with their own parents.

Another feature of the built environment that influences the type of ties used in the dyadic network structure is the mix of residences and businesses. As discussed in the first chapter, León is home to thousands of small businesses that cater to their local environs. Many of these businesses are in or adjacent to the business owners' own homes. Therefore, the clients who arrive to buy bread, get their radio fixed, or have their hair cut are also neighbors. Residents living on the economic margins cannot afford even the modest fare for public transportation, so they prefer to visit businesses within walking distance. Fortunately for them, options abound: Given the dearth of steady work in León, small enterprises are a necessary strategy for income generation, so they proliferate everywhere. It is not necessary to go far to find most of what one needs. Moreover, for residents earning low, sporadic wages, income arrives as small quantities of cash on an irregular basis. Thus, residents buy provisions such rice, beans, and cooking oil in relatively small amounts, and they shop for these items frequently. It is not uncommon for residents to visit the market or the *pulpería* (a small corner store that sells food staples, basic necessities, and packaged foods) nearly every day. And home-based *tortilleras* sell fresh handmade corn tortillas daily.

One final feature of León's built environment that is relevant to the job search is the structure of the homes. Houses in the older part of the city are built side-by-side, close together; they have patios in the back, where residents grow plants, cook food, wash clothes, fix cars, or raise animals. Western Nicaragua is hot for most of the year, and it is practically insufferable in March and April. Low-income residents do not have air conditioning to keep them cool, so they set out chairs in front of their homes and watch the activity on the street. People passing by give

a wave or call a greeting. If they have time, they stop for a brief chat. In this way, residents see their neighbors more often than they otherwise might.

In sum, many residents of León live in their neighborhoods for a long time, they visit the same local businesses frequently, and they see their neighbors often. The regular interactions that occur in León's neighborhoods possess the key criteria theorized to be important for the formation of trust: they are frequent and face-to-face (Small 2007). Moreover, they involve exchanges, which facilitate the formation of trust (Molm 2010), which is essential between employers and employees, and affect, which motivates network members to help job-seekers (Bian 1997). This explains why neighbors feature so prominently among dyadic networks.

The next most common type of tie for dyad networks is friends. Notably, many of these friends were also neighbors because the friendship was formed in the neighborhood or school context. Rarely were friendships formed in other organizational contexts, such as churches or community groups. Respondents reported lacking the time or interest for involvement in church or community groups. Friends are network members that are chosen voluntarily, not inherited as family members are. Thus, by definition they entail some level of trust and affection, and they involve exchange. Indeed, scholars studying poor communities have observed that close friendships can take on the status of fictive kinship, and that friendships are built and maintained through ongoing exchanges of assistance (Stack 1974, Lomnitz 2014 [1977]).

It is likely that neighbors and friends constitute nearly half of dyadic job networks because of both their proximity *and* their distance. Unlike close family, neighbors and friends need not see the "backstage" (Goffman 1973[1959]) of a person's life. This allows job-seekers to manage the impressions of friends and neighbors even while cultivating the trust and affection

that make it possible to mobilize the tie. For example, when approaching a neighbor for a job, a job-seeker may exaggerate the degree to which he truly "needs" a job. And because friendships are voluntary ties, they do not carry the same level of obligation that family relationships do, allowing job-seekers the freedom to ask for wages instead of being expected to work for free.

Dyadic hiring was especially common in certain types of occupations. In particular, employers who worked as contractors often hired assistants from within their personal networks. In the predominantly male construction industry, employers hired younger brothers, cousins, neighbors, and friends to assist them with masonry, electrical work, plumbing, and other trades. Among women, employers hired sister, cousins, neighbors, and friends to care for their children or to wash their clothes. Esmeralda Romero is an unemployed 32-year-old with two children who lives with her mother and sister. While she looks for work, Esmeralda said, she earns some extra money by doing domestic work for a friend. "I have friend who calls me from time to time to maybe go to wash her clothes, clean her house. She works at [the factory], so the shifts do not allow her to do everything in the house...so she calls me to see if I am unemployed and if maybe I can go clean for her or something, but it is not a big deal, maybe two hours I am there cleaning for her." Hiring network members for childcare, domestic work, and laundry assure the trust necessary for leaving one's home, family, and possessions in the hands of someone else. And hiring network members as assistants serves the dual purpose of learning a new trade for the job-seeker while proving greater control for the employer. Contractors need assurance that their assistants will be out of bed and on the job site early in the morning, ready to mix concrete or dig trenches. When employers live in the same house or on the same street as their workers, they can more easily assure compliance. And for the job-seeker, being an assistant can be a stepping

stone to a better opportunity, because these jobs count as work experience even though they pay very little. Thus, dyadic networks can be mutually beneficial for employers and job-seekers, allowing employers to find trustworthy workers and allowing inexperienced or unemployed job-seekers to earn income.

Triadic networks

Triadic networks consist of the job-seeker, the employer, and the contact who connects the two. The contact can provide a referral, a letter of reference, or information only, but he must have a connection to the employer for the search to be coded as triadic. Examining the relationship between the job-seeker and the contact first, the two most common categories are, again, friends and neighbors (see Table 6). This time, friends are most common, at 23 percent (116) of job searches, followed by neighbors at 18 percent (89). Similar to dyadic networks, contacts were siblings in 7 percent of searches, contacts were cousins in 7 percent of searches, and contacts were parents in 7 percent of searches. Other common ties were acquaintances, aunts and uncles, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, and former coworkers, but all of these constituted less than 5 percent of searches each. Nineteen percent of searches involved "other" contacts, which included former classmates, former co-workers, girlfriends, sons-in-law, and fellow soldiers from the army. These findings suggest that job-seekers use a wider array of network ties for triadic searches than for dyadic searches.

Examining the relationships between contacts and employers, in 55 percent (280) of triadic searches the contact worked for the employer. Thirteen percent (65) of searches involved "other" tie types, and another 18 percent (91) were unknown. In these cases, respondents could

not specify the nature of the relationship between their contact and the employer from whom they sought employment. The employer and the contact were friends in 7 percent (38) of the searches. The employer was a former employer to the contact in 2 percent (11) of the searches, an acquaintance in 2 percent (12) of the searches, and a parent in 2 percent (11) of the triadic searches.

Triadic searches involving current employees are prevalent because they have benefits for employers, contacts, and job-seekers alike. By recruiting through employees they already trust, low-wage employers can transfer this trust to the job-seeker being vouched for. Recruiting through employees gives employers an additional source of social control on the job, because employees are motivated to help the new hire succeed (Gomberg-Muñoz 2011). Also, employees have firsthand information about the employer and the job, which helps them find workers who would have the skills and experience necessary for a good fit (Yakubovich 2005). Employees benefit from helping to recruit new workers because they can gain an ally in the workplace or accrue prestige in the eyes of the employer (Granovetter 1995[1973]). Job-seekers benefit by mobilizing a contact who is close enough to the employer to have influence (Bian et al 2015), increasing their chances of getting the job. And once hired, their contacts can be counted upon for training, advice, and guidance.

Four-node networks

Four-node networks are those in which a job-seeker has a contact, who in turn has a contact, who is connected to the employer. Four-node networks allow job-seekers to reach beyond their

immediate network ties to access structurally distant or "weak" ties – that is, ties that bridge disparate networks.

The four-node networks reported by respondents entailed only referrals, not job information alone. At first glance, this may seem puzzling – why would job information not travel easily across networks? After all, giving job information does not require the contact to assume any of the risk of a referral. But information does not flow uninterrupted through networks like water through pipes (Podolny and Baron 1997); instead, actors serve as brokers, directing information to some network members while withholding it from others; they also interpret information, thus altering it as in a game of telephone. Contacts do not want to appear to network members as giving unsolicited job advice (Marin 2012), so they direct job information to those whose credentials and employment status they know well. Moreover, job openings are filled so quickly, there is not time enough for the information to travel far. In León's labor market, job openings rarely last long, given the number of people seeking work. Respondents reported hearing about a job opening one day and arriving at the workplace the next day, only to be told the position had been filled already. In some cases, employers expected job-seekers to begin working immediately, on the same day they interviewed. Fausto Mejía, a 29-year-old auto mechanic, said he once went to a mechanic's shop to inquire about a position he had heard about, and the employer asked him why he was wearing sandals if he was planning to work as a mechanic. "If you drop a tool, you will mess up your feet," Fausto recalls the employer saying. Fausto assured the employer he was only there to ask for work. Thus, job information does not travel far across networks because it is directed instead toward those job-seekers whose need for it is known and because openings are filled quickly.

Nearly half – 49 percent – of the four-node networks were used for domestic work and childcare jobs. Often, the job-seeker who is looking for domestic work asks a friend, who is already employed as a domestic worker, for job leads. Then the friend's employer asks her if she knows anyone who is looking for work, because a friend or family member of the employer is looking to hire someone. The friend makes the connection, and the job-seeker is interviewed and hired. Alternatively, contacts are cousins, siblings, friends, and parents, who connect job-seekers to employers through their friends, parents, siblings, and spouses.

In sum, the majority of job searches involved assistance from others, and most of this assistance came from referrals through triadic networks. Referrals came from neighbors, friends, and family members, for informational, relational, and structural reasons: Network members have relevant information about the job-seeker's reputation and qualifications; network members are motivated by affection and trust to help the job-seeker; finally, network members know where the job-seeker lives. Judging another person's sincerity is difficult. For contacts, then, helping a job-seeker who lives in the same neighborhood or is part of the same family is a means of social control, almost like collateral. Seen this way, trust is not so much a relational property of a network tie as it is the product of structural arrangements: It is more difficult to get away with theft or absenteeism when your contacts live in the same neighborhood and know the same people.

Within these referral networks, all parties must engage in relational work – the process of negotiating the boundary between one's economic and social life (Zelizer 2005, Bandelj 2012, Bandelj et al 2015). Scholars of embeddedness in the tradition of Granovetter (1985) contend that the economic and social spheres are inseparable, not distinct (Krippener and Alvarez 2007).

Likewise, Zelizer's connected worlds perspective contends that our social lives are not the conflicting opposite of our economic lives, nor is social behavior just another term for economic behavior. Instead, Zelizer proposes, the economic and social spheres are inescapably intertwined – our worlds are connected – but boundaries are erected and policed in an attempt to delineate the social sphere from the economic. For example, it is illegal to sell a newborn baby because reproduction is meant to be an act of selfless maternal love. In many real-world contexts, however, the boundary is porous and ever-shifting, requiring people to engage in relational work; for example, couples who hire surrogates to carry their babies must find a way to balance the economic exchange with a deeply intimate social one (Hochschild 2012). Below, I explain how job-seekers, contacts, and employers use relational work to navigate the use of social relationships for economic ends.

Job-seekers who do not act strategically enough may miss out on job opportunities, while job-seekers who act too strategically risk being viewed by network members as too self-interested. Contacts who refuse to give referrals to anyone are rationally protecting their own interests, given the risk to their own reputation if the referral turns out poorly. But refusing to help a friend who is looking for work can jeopardize the friendship, and giving successful referrals is a way to build and strengthen network ties with others, as well as a way to bolster one's own reputation. Employers who are approached by network members looking for jobs must critically examine their trustworthiness without alienating the job-seekers, who are their friends, neighbors, and family members. Each actor, then, must strike a delicate balance between building and maintaining their network ties and using those ties for economic purposes – to find a job, to help someone else find a job, or to run a business.

Relational work of job-seekers

Because it is the job-seeker's duty to seek out job leads from network members and to cultivate a positive reputation, the most intensive relational work is done by job-seekers. Relational work is especially salient at the beginning of the process, when job-seekers are approaching contacts to ask about jobs, and at the end of the process, when a job-seeker decides to leave their current job.

Approaching contacts

One form of relational work is differentiating among one's network ties (Zelizer 2005, 2012). When asked about their personal networks, job-seekers described relationships with family and neighbors that varied from close to distant. Moreover, relationship *strength* was not synonymous with relationship *type*; for instance, respondents reported closer relations with some family members than with others. Ingrid Bonilla, 33, explained that she feels closer to her cousins on her mother's side of the family than she does with the cousins on her father's side:

> With the maternal cousins it is more, it is closer…I arrive or we encounter each other, and we stay talking, 'hey, my child is sick,' or 'look, my mom is sick, how is yours?' And things like that. 'Look, are you studying or are you working? What are you working on? Where are you working?' See, but it is more with the maternal than the paternal [family].

For Ingrid, the greater emotional intimacy she has with her maternal cousins gives her the freedom to discuss personal topics, including her job search. Conversely, a lack of emotional

intimacy in the relationship between job-seekers and contacts can lead job-seekers to label the contacts as unapproachable. When Nicolas Gonzales, an unemployed 33-year-old, applied for a job in the export-zone factory, his aunt already was working there. However, he did not tell her he was applying or ask her for help: "I did not say anything to her because I did not want to bother her." Nicolas's reticence toward his aunt is a function of their relationship, not Nicolas's predisposition – he had approached friends and other family members for job-finding assistance at other times.

The lack of emotional intimacy is a powerful deterrent from approaching contacts, even when a desirable job is at stake. Benito Palacios, a 65-year-old retiree, has a sister-in-law who works at the university. Although he had wanted to work there, and he knew that she had enough influence to help him get hired, he said, "I don't dare ask [her]…distance is better." Again, Benito's unwillingness to mobilize the tie is not a predisposition: Although he dislikes this sister-in-law, he said he gets along well with his wife's other sister, who helped him obtain his former job as a security guard. When scanning their personal networks for opportunities, job-seekers like Nicolas and Benito bypass network ties that they have labeled off-limits because the relationships lack the necessary closeness that asking for a referral requires.

Asking for job-finding assistance

Scholars have distinguished between active searching, in which the job-seeker engages in search behavior, and non-searching (or passive searching), in which a job opportunity is offered to someone who is not actively searching for work (McDonald and Elder 2006). For the searches

studied here, most – 62 percent – were coded as active, meaning that the job-seeker approached either employers or network members to inquire about jobs. Thirty-two percent were coded as passive, meaning that the job-seeker was offered a referral or a job without asking for it, and another 6 percent were unknown. There were no significant differences in search strategy by age, gender, or occupation.

Because searching for work through personal networks involves ties formed for other, non-instrumental purposes, search behavior is woven into the fabric of daily social interactions, which occur either on purpose or by chance. Job-seekers visit family and friends in order to maintain the ties and find out how others are doing, but they also hope to learn about opportunities. When 57-year-old Francisco Roque was a young man, he starting selling residential pesticides door-to-door, working on commission because it was the only job he could find at the time. Hoping to find more stable employment, Francisco went to visit his brothers' godfather, who was the director of a public hospital at the time. Selling pesticides gave Francisco a valid pretext for visiting, so that asking for work would not be the main purpose of his visit. The godfather was not home, but Francisco was received by the man's wife. When she asked Francisco how his sales job was going, he acknowledged that sales were slow, and he told her he needed to find more stable work. She told him to return later in the afternoon, when her husband would be home. According to Francisco, the godmother spoke to her husband on his behalf, and ultimately Francisco was given a job at the hospital.

Selling products door to door not only gave Francisco the pretext he needed to approach his brother's godfather, it also helped his prospects by giving the godmother the impression that Francisco is a *luchador*, or fighter. Similarly, street vending is a way to simultaneously generate

income while signaling one's industriousness to observers. Some respondents described street vending as embarrassing and physically demanding, yet dignified work, indicating that those who engage in it truly need the income and are willing to do whatever it takes. One respondent was offered a job as a bus fare collector after the bus driver saw him selling sweets on the bus alongside his mother.

Asking about jobs also occurs during chance encounters. Ana Peralta, 48, recounted a time when she obtained a job as a cook in a restaurant after running into the owner's brother, who used to live in her neighborhood, on the bus. "I saw him and he greeted me. You see, I did not want to greet him, I did not have the energy but I do not know what came over me and I greeted him, 'hello, how are you?'... 'Look,' he tells me, 'my sister is looking for a worker, a cook, because one has just left.'" When Ana went to the restaurant to apply two days later, she was hired on the spot. The job opportunity arose from a chance meeting on a bus, which Ana might have missed if she had not forced herself to be sociable on a day when she was not in the mood for small talk. In the reputation game, job-seekers do not have the luxury of being unsociable.

Respondents' reports of these interactions reveal a consistent pattern: job-seekers visit network members or encounter them in public places; the contact asks, "how are you?" and the job-seeker reveals that she is unemployed and tells the contact to keep her in mind if he hears about anything. Alternatively, the contact asks about the job-seeker's work status, creating an opportunity for the job-seeker to request job-finding assistance. Ingrid Bonilla, a 33-year-old mother of two, described these interactions: "I arrive or we encounter each other, and we stay talking, 'hey, my child is sick,' or 'look, my mom is sick, how is yours?' And things like that.

'Look, are you studying or are you working? What are you working on? Where are you working?' Through such casual interactions, contacts can obtain information about a job-seeker's employment status and job-seekers can ask for assistance in a casual, indirect way. Ana Peralta, the woman who heard about a job opportunity while riding the bus, said, "When I see people I tell them, 'look, I am without work. If you see something or need something let me know." Ana's open-ended request gives her contacts the option of refusing assistance without saying so, preventing awkwardness and preserving the relationship. By weaving the exchange into the fabric of a regular social interaction, job-seekers mobilize their personal ties for instrumental purposes while subordinating the economic interests of the actors to the broader context of the social relation itself. Because the discussion of the job search is embedded within an informal encounter, the intensity of asking directly for a favor is blunted, and the appearance of naked self-interest is avoided.

Leaving a job

As discussed in the previous chapter, a worker who quits a job runs the risk of being seen as someone who neither needs nor deserves job opportunities. Of course, however, workers must seek the best wages and working conditions they can find, and illnesses or other obligations can interfere with one's ability to keep a job. Thus, leaving a job that one has obtained through a referral requires relational work: Workers who need or want to leave their job but want to avoid damaging their reputations can return to the contacts who gave them a referral to explain their reasons for wanting to quit. Alejandra Quintero, a retired 63-year-old, recommended a woman from her neighborhood for a job as a domestic worker, but the worker did not like the treatment

she received from her employer and decided to quit. Alejandra explained, "She told me the reason why she didn't feel good. And I saw it as unjust too." If Alejandra's neighbor had quit without providing an explanation, Alejandra may have concluded that the woman was unreliable and unworthy of referrals. By approaching contacts before quitting, a dissatisfied worker can avoid marring her reputations. Rather than accusing Alejandra of sending her to a bad employer, the worker approached Alejandra in a self-effacing way to explain her side of the story. By convincing Alejandra that the employer's behavior was "unjust," the worker preserved her reputation as a worthy worker in Alejandra's eyes.

Ana Peralta, the 48-year-old cook mentioned above, helped her sister find a job in a restaurant. Even though her sister quit after two weeks of working, Ana did not judge her as unworthy of work because the sister had approached Ana to explain her reasons. "She was only there fifteen days because she could not endure it. The job was very hard…she received her first pay and told me, 'Look [Ana], I am going to go, because...' And I saw it and I told her, 'Yes, you're right.'" Through relational work, job-seekers preserve their reputations and maintain harmonious relationships with their contacts by approaching them to explain, in terms that are most flattering to the worker and least flattering to the employer, their reasons for leaving a job.

Relational work of contacts and employers

If job referrals are a valuable resource for job seekers, they represent an uncertain outcome for contacts. Potentially, job referrals offer a win-win-win scenario for job seekers, contacts, and employers: the job seeker finds a job, the employer finds a qualified, trustworthy employee, and the contact builds her own reputation while doing two favors at once. Thus, giving a job referral

can be instrumentally rational action on the part of the contact. But referrals carry risks, too: if the employer is disappointed with the match, or the employee is dissatisfied with the job, either party is likely to blame the contact who made the referral. The degree of instrumental rationality served by a referral varies in direct relation to the risk involved, and the level of risk depends upon three factors: (1) the structural relationship between the contact and the job-seeker; (2) the job seeker's reputation; (3) and the contact's relationship with the employer.

If the job seeker is economically dependent on the contact, the latter has a strong incentive to help him find work because doing so alleviates the contact's own financial burden. This is one of the reasons why young workers are connected to job opportunities through their parents. Also, respondents reported finding jobs for siblings and siblings-in-law because doing so increases the likelihood that these siblings will assist older parents, alleviating the contact's burden.

Job seekers are not equally risky. A job seeker with a strong reputation is considered a safer bet, and therefore a more rational choice, than a worker with an untested or tainted reputation. This poses a challenge for young workers, who have yet to build a reputation. So they often turn to parents, parents' friends, or their friends' parents to help them obtain their first jobs. Also, respondents' concern with their reputation was evident during interviews – their comments about themselves and others were clearly patterned: they talked about trustworthiness, an absence of vices such as drinking or gambling, and an eagerness to work.

If the contact is working for the employer for whom he is recommending an applicant, the risk is greater because a negative outcome has worse repercussions for the contact. Employees who make a referrals with a negative outcome lose the trust of the employer and

suffer damage to their own reputations. While employees may have more to lose, they also have more to gain – doing the employer a good turn increases trust and may increase the contact's influence with the employer. Arguably, the repercussions of a bad referral are worse when the relationship between the contact and the employer is a professional one. If the relationship is personal, a bad referral may create short-term tension but no long-term damage. In the case of domestic work, for example, employers often seek new employees through their friends' domestic employees. In this four-node network, the one who carries the most risk is the domestic employee serving as a contact, not her employer. And contacts can recommend applicants to employers in their personal networks with some risk to their own reputations; for example, a young woman may recommend her boyfriend to work in her uncle's store. If the uncle is displeased with his new employee, it is less likely to affect the niece's future employment prospects than the boyfriend's. It will, however, affect the contact's ability to give referrals for that employer in the future.

Respondents' reports of job referrals underscore the uncertain nature of the outcome. Overall, respondents reported more positive referral outcomes than negative ones, due to an excess of caution among contacts or a bias toward reporting positive experiences. About a third of respondents described referrals that had a positive outcome, while about a fifth of respondents described negative outcomes of referrals. (These are conservative numbers because a referral outcome was only coded as positive or negative if it was described explicitly as such by the respondent.) Half of women over age 40 reported making or receiving a referral with a positive outcome, and 40 percent of men over 40 reported a positive outcome. In comparison, 23 percent of men age 20-40 gave a good or received a good referral, and only 12 percent of women age 20-

40 reported giving or receiving good referrals. Younger people give and receive fewer referrals overall because they have smaller networks and less work experience than older workers. (It also is true that younger workers are more likely to resist the reputation game, as I discuss in the next chapter.) These figures should be interpreted cautiously, as they are derived from a non-probability sample and therefore are not generalizable to the population as a whole.

At least 34 respondents (32%) talked about giving or receiving referrals that turned out well. Alejandra Quintero, 63, was a cook for the Nicaraguan military until she retired. While shopping one day at an outdoor produce market, Alejandra encountered a friend who told her she was looking for domestic work because she was unhappy with her current employer. A short while later, Alejandra recalled, a friend told her she was looking for a domestic worker, and Alejandra recommended the job seeker from the market. According to Alejandra she told the employer, "I know her since she was young, and she worked in Managua, and now she is here for her children. But she is a very good person. I know her and I have never had a problem." The employer hired the job-seeker, and two weeks later the employer thanked her for making the match. And the job-seeker thanked Alejandra, too. "When I saw her I asked 'how did it go?' [She said] 'Thank you [Alejandra], I feel good in that place, [it's] nothing like where I was.' Blessed God. And I felt good because I did a favor for both of them."

While referrals often turn out well, they also can turn out poorly. Of the 105 people interviewed, 22 (21%) reported making or receiving a referral with a negative outcome. There are several ways a referral can go bad: the job-seeker may agree to take the job offer but never show up to work; the job-seeker may perform poorly or commit a transgression on the job; or the job-seeker may quit after a short time because she does not like the job. Alma Rojas is a 44-

year-old childcare worker. Alma recounted a time when she recommended a friend to work for someone in her employer's network. "I told a friend of mine about the job, and she said yes. And later, at the appointed hour, she did not go [to work]. So the [employer] called me telling me, 'Your friend did not present herself to work.' So I looked bad." In cases where job-seekers fail to present themselves to employers after they have asked contacts for referrals, it is more likely to occur when the job-seeker already has a job and is seeking a better one.

The relational work of contacts takes three forms: Differentiating job-seekers, preparing job-seekers, and renouncing responsibility for the referral. The first two approaches reflect interactions between contacts and job-seekers, while the latter pertains to interactions between contacts and employers.

Differentiating job-seekers

In their role as contacts, respondents of this study described the job-seekers in their networks in terms of three categories: safe bets, risky prospects, and blank slates. The categorization of job-seekers reflects the meaning-making process of contacts as they grapple with imperfect and often conflicting information about the job-seekers in their networks.

Safe bets are job-seekers in whom the contact has high confidence. Blanco Cortez, a 50-year-old welder, is part of a referral network – he and his neighbors recommend one another for construction jobs. When one of them is hired for a project, he helps other job seekers in the neighborhood get hired. However, Blanco said, there are a few neighbors whom Blanco would not recommend, because "they make you look bad…they are loafers…and others like to take it easy…so you cannot recommend them." Blanco and his neighbors operate as a kind of loosely

structured team, working together on projects, rather than atomized job-seekers searching independently. This approach benefits Blanco by connecting him to job opportunities in an industry characterized by an oversupply of labor, but it also exposes him to risk. For workers like Blanco, obtaining work in the future depends in part on past performance; engineers and contractors who are dissatisfied with a worker will not hire him again. Because Blanco's reputation, and his own job performance, depend in part on the performance of his co-workers, he only recommends those he can trust completely. Like Blanco, Juan Urena is part of a referral network composed of neighborhood friends. The 21-year-old mason said he only recommends skilled workers because "they have already worked in [masonry], they have already had several jobs, like me."

One way contacts strike a balance is by giving referrals to the job seekers who need work the most. When 24-year-old Estela Fernandez was working in an orthodontist's office, her employer told her he was seeking a domestic worker. Though recommending someone to work in her employer's house was risky, Estela gave the referral to a woman she knew named Dalia, because "she had two children she had to support." Dalia was not the only person who had asked Estela for help finding work, but Estela chose her "because it seemed to me she was the one with the most need because she has children. My other friends, well, don't have children, and you know it is harder to support yourself with children than alone." Helping the neediest (value-rationality) allows contacts to justify taking the risk (instrumental rationality) of making a referral.

This sentiment was echoed by Ana Peralta, 48, who works as a cook in a restaurant. When Ana's employer was recruiting new workers, Ana recommended an unemployed woman

who had two children. “I felt bad that she had children, because I was like that. I was like that. And so I said… ‘Poor dear, she has two children, she is looking for work.’ And she is not an irresponsible person I would say, so I told her. And I connected her [to the job].” Ana knew that recommending a job seeker to her employer was risky, but Ana sympathized with the job seeker. Assuring herself that the job seeker was not “an irresponsible person,” Ana makes a decision that reflects both instrumental rationality and value rationality.

Risky prospects are job-seekers with negative reputations, whom the contact perceives as an unworthy candidate for referrals. Another way contacts deal with risky prospects is by providing job information without a referral. Jacinta Moran, a 54-year-old domestic workers, said she provides job information but not referrals to those who ask her for help. “I tell them, right? ‘There is a [now hiring] sign.’ But no, there are people who say, ‘recommend me,’ and you cannot recommend because we don’t know, right? …There are [employers] who tell me, ‘find me [a worker], but one that you know is good.’ But not even I know how she is, right?” Jacinta avoids referrals because she does not want to be held responsible for an outcome over which she has little control. Lorenzo Peralta, a 55-year-old security guard, said he obtained his job by applying directly to the employer, so he tells others to do the same. When approached by friends, neighbors, and former co-workers, who ask him for his help obtaining a job, Lorenzo tells them, “go yourself, go recommend yourself on your own.” Lorenzo said he is afraid that if he recommends someone his employer will tell him, “this one is worthless. He is a thief.” Therefore, Lorenzo said, “I don’t help anyone…It is their problem.”

Contacts do not tell the job-seekers in their networks that they are risky prospects. Julia Moran, 32, said she and her husband have helped others find work in the past. Once, though, they were approached by someone they did not want to recommend. Julia's husband

> didn't want to [help him] because he told me, 'No, he is very irresponsible, because now he might be needing work, and afterward he already felt better, and already he threw the job away. A better one came along and it was worth it to him and he left the one where he was, so better not [recommend him]. So he always told him, 'No, no, nothing has come up.'...Among [his co-workers] they saw the irresponsibility among themselves. But of course they could not say anything because it cannot be done.

Despite their history with the job seeker, neither Julia nor her husband felt comfortable enough to tell the job seeker that he had a reputation for unreliability. This reluctance was expressed by men and women, the old and the young. Elias Valverde, a 40-year-old driver, said that when he is approached for job-finding assistance by someone he does not want to recommend, he pretends to respond positively while ignoring the request. "If I do not trust [them], if they ask me for help, I can tell them, 'Yes, I will help you.' But since I know that, let's say, he is a delinquent, that he wants to get in just to do damage…I can tell him yes, but there [in the workplace] I don't do anything [to get him hired]."

Aurelia Herrera, 59, refuses referrals to people she believes are untrustworthy, but she does not explain this to the risky job seekers. "It is better to tell them no, well, 'I can't,' 'there is no [job available],' or 'we will see.' But the reality is…no." Contacts likely have three motivations for withholding this essential feedback from job-seekers: First, they want to avoid an

awkward interaction, which could become confrontational. Second, the contact likely wants to preserve the relationship. Deflecting a referral request diplomatically avoids spoiling the relationship. Third, and somewhat paradoxically, contacts may want to avert attempts by job seekers to repair their reputations on the spot. Informing job seekers about their negative reputations surely would prompt attempts by job seekers to defend themselves or to demonstrate their trustworthiness. Because contacts, employers, and workers reify reputations as real and fixed qualities, overt attempts at impression management by job-seekers likely are viewed with suspicion.

When contacts decide to withhold referrals from job seekers they find untrustworthy, they seldom give their true reason for doing so. Instead, contacts deflect, saying that no one is hiring at the moment or promising to put in a word with the employer without following up. The result of this is that job-seekers classified as risky prospects by their network members cannot take steps to repair their reputations. This may lock job-seekers into the lowest-paid jobs or freeze them out of the labor market altogether.

Blank slates are untested workers – young job-seekers looking for their first job, people entering the labor market for the first time, and new arrivals in León. Jesus Valerio, 27, works as a truck driver for his uncle's bakery. He described how he recommended two neighbors; one was hired to work in the bakery, packing the bread for shipment, and the other was hired by Jesus's aunt to provide childcare. Neither of these job-seekers had done these jobs before, so both were hesitant, Jesus recalled. "He was afraid, because he didn't know how what it was like [to work in a bakery]...She was a little nervous because it was a child and she had never worked with children." But Jesus encouraged them: "You know that everything in the beginning is hard,

and that's how you learn. No one is born knowing…You are going to learn...And, well, thank God everything turned out well and they have learned." Jesus took a chance on recommending two neighbors whom he had never worked with before and who had no experience in the positions for which he was referring them. Jesus admitted, "It was really a risk." Though Jesus had little to gain from these referrals, he indicated that the economic "necessity" of the job seekers motivated him to help.

But many respondents displayed a surprising willingness to help others find work, even those whom respondents did not know well. Keyling Estrada, 22, freelances as a manicurist. Keyling, who describes herself as an Evangelical Christian, said she has never turned down a request for job-finding assistance. While working in a pizzeria three years ago, Keyling recommended others to work there. When asked how she knew these workers were trustworthy, she responded, "I didn't know… 'Let's try,' I said." Although she was unsure about how her referrals would affect her own reputation or employment, Keyling took a chance anyway. "And they did it…Everything turned out well. Thank God."

Estela Fernandez, the 24-year-old mentioned above, helped a woman find a job as a domestic worker. Estela said, "I didn't really know if she was trustworthy or not, but you know you can't mistrust everyone. You have to give her an opportunity, because no one knows if she is good or bad, you always have to give an opportunity to people. She will recommend herself after that." For contacts like Estela, a lack of work experience is not indicative of poor character; instead, young job seekers deserve a chance to prove themselves. Estela's view reflects the reality that job-seekers with little work experience require a helping hand to get a foothold in the

labor market. Once they have been given an opportunity, Estela suggests, they are expected to demonstrate their worthiness of future opportunities.

Gerardo Perez is a 21-year-old whose grandparents own a restaurant and bar. Gerardo recounted a time when he helped a former classmate get hired; at a chance encounter at a party, the job seeker asked Gerardo if he would help him obtain a job at one of his grandparents' businesses. A few days later, Gerardo overheard his grandfather and uncle discussing the possibility of hiring a new bartender for the bar. Gerardo recommended the former classmate. Gerardo does not consider the man a friend, and they did not share any work experience together, so the referral was risky. Gerardo explained, "He was always good in classes but I bet on destiny, and it turned out well." Gerardo said he took a chance on the classmate because "I always have thought that we are all human, we are all people with needs. I have never had the thought that…one is better and another is worse. And he asked me to help him, and I didn't see anything bad in helping him. And the kid is working there and has not made me look bad so far." Though Gerardo recognizes that a bad referral would affect him, his describes his decision in terms of value-rationality. It was the first time Gerardo recommended someone for a job, and he said he gives "thanks to God" that it turned out well.

Contacts cited the parental responsibilities of untested job-seekers as a compelling reason to help them find work. Julia Moran, 32, helped two of her cousins obtain employment with her husband's company, an importer and distributor of food and pharmaceutical products. "I recommended that he give employment to two of my cousins. He recommended them to his boss, and he gave them the job." For both cousins, who are younger than Julia, the job was their first. Thus, recommending workers without experience was risky for Julia and her husband. But

Julia said she chose to help them anyway. "Because I looked at them…one of them became pregnant and the baby's father did not take responsibility for his child. I saw that it makes things very difficult [for my cousin], so I told my husband, 'look, help her, the poor thing. You know that the baby is newborn... [She] does not have the support of anyone. Help her.'" For Julia, helping a new mother in need was worth the risk. "She turned out to be a good worker," Julia said. As for the other cousin, Julia helped her because "she had a husband, but they lived in disagreement, in dispute. One week she was at her mom's place, another week she was at his place…They had a lot of problems." The cousin's unstable living situation prompted Julia to assist her, and the gamble paid off: "She didn't make [my husband] look bad either."

Younger respondents expressed greater willingness to give assistance to untested job seekers. Their willingness to take a chance may reflect their lack of experience with negative referrals – which will be remedied in due time – or it may be a reflection of their own experiences: as young workers, they know how it feels to need others to take a chance on them.

Importantly, contacts not only assign their network members to categories, but they must revise their categorizations based on new information. When contacts made referrals that turned out poorly, they were forced to reconsider their assessment of the job-seeker and the nature of their relationship. Leonel Munoz, 44, is a self-employed driver. Once, Leonel said, he recommended an acquaintance for a job as a driver because Leonel knew the man had a family to support. Leonel, who was unemployed at the time, could not take the job himself because his driver's license was expired, so he offered it to the other man instead.

> I recommended him…He had three children. I saw him truly [in need] because you recognize when someone is unemployed…[But] after about a month, he

> forgot the hardships that he had while unemployed and he drank liquor, and when you are behind the wheel you do not need to do that…they fired him because if you use [substances] you cannot [work]. I did not say anything to him. He knows what he did, he did not do right. He made me look bad.

Leonel thought that giving the man a referral was a safe bet because he "truly" needed the job, but the outcome was the worst-case scenario – the worker was fired for misconduct and it reflected poorly on Leonel. Despite this, Leonel chose not to confront the acquaintance about his transgression. For contacts, avoiding a confrontational interaction is often the best way to deal with a failed referral, because confrontation will not change past events but it can lead to the severance of ties.

Alvaro Vasquez, a 52-year-old security guard, said he has helped many people find work, because he understands the urgency of making a living "When you are working, sometimes someone [else] is unemployed, without work, and requires the economic maintenance of their household." So he tries to help others when he can. "I have always said yes to people who ask me for some work, and I help them with all my will. But [only] as long as the person is known, right?" Once, though, he referred a friend for a job and it turned out poorly. "I knew there was an open position. So he came to my house, where I live, and asked me if there was work. I told him yes. But I did not know him completely, what kind of person he was, but rather as a distant friend. So I recommended him, and he made me look bad." In the wake of the bad referral, Alvaro revised his perception of his friendship with the job-seeker: in hindsight, Alvaro realized that the friendship was not as close as he originally thought.

Preparing job-seekers

Another way contacts strike a balance is by informing job seekers about the negative aspects of the jobs for which they are applying. By doing so, contacts mitigate the risk of a referral by making sure the job-seeker understands what the job entails before applying. Adan Contreras, a 42-year-old who works as a security guard at a processing plant on the outskirts of the city, has referred several people to work for his employer. Because Adan works for a well-established company that pays a bit better than most, he said, he is often approached by job seekers in his network inquiring about opportunities. In León, it is common for workers to compare salaries and schedules, to see if they can obtain more favorable conditions by switching jobs. Upon learning that Adan's wages are higher than theirs, Adan said, job seekers often ask, "And how do I get in?" Adan respond cautiously:

> They get carried away by the money, but not for what they are going to do there. So I tell them, "If you are working [somewhere already] and you are not ready to sacrifice yourself, it's better if you don't move [from your current job to this one], because it's hard there." And there are people who think that going to the [plant] is like going to the city, that there is electricity, but no.

Before offering a referral, Adan makes sure that the job-seeker is aware of the demands of working long hours in dark fields. For contacts like Adan, informing applicants about the negative aspects of a job is the best way to make a good match. Ingrid Bonilla, 33, also warns applicants about working conditions. While working in the meat counter of a supermarket, Ingrid was approached by a woman she knew; they had worked together previously in the export-zone factory. Ingrid explained to the job-seeker the hours and wages she could expect.

"Before you sign a contract...you should know something. This is the situation here right now…sometimes they give you lunch, sometimes not. They do not pay overtime." For Ingrid, telling job seekers the truth about working conditions is important "because it is their choice if they stay or not…They knew what they were getting into, how much they were going to make and what they were going to do." Ingrid compared her honest approach to the employer's tendency to "paint a pretty picture, and when the time comes [the workers] end up leaving."

In León, the need for income can cause job-seekers to underestimate the low wages or long hours involved in a job, but once they are hired they may realize the job is not worth it, or they may seek out better opportunities. Contacts must discourage the job-seekers they referred from quitting in order to preserve their own reputations, but in the end they cannot force them to stay. So contacts prepare job-seekers by warning them about the most negative aspects of the job for which they are applying.

Another way of preparing job-seekers is to remind them of the obligation incurred in a referral. Karl Santos, a 43-year-old mechanic, referred two people – a friend and his daughter's boyfriend – to his employer. He warned them in advance not to make him look bad: "The first thing I told them was, 'Look, do not make me look bad because I am recommending you.'" Karl's warnings were in vain; ultimately both men were fired, one for shirking on the job and the other for absenteeism. Karl said he did not confront the men about their poor performance and that the relationships were not severed; even negative outcomes were not a sufficient reason for burning bridges.

Renouncing responsibility

Alejandra Quintero, 63, recommends other women for domestic work. However, she acknowledges that knowing a person socially does not always provide a clear window into her professional behavior. "To my friends whom I have recommended, I tell them, 'Look, I know you as friends. You're the ones who are going to recommend yourselves. Don't make me look bad so that [the employers] complain to me, but also you are going to recommend yourselves. You need to work…but that depends upon you." In addition to preparing the job seeker by reminding her of her obligations, Alejandra also warns the employer: When employers ask Alejandra to recommend someone for domestic work, she tells them, "Look, I can tell you I know her, by her face I know her, but her customs I do not know. You will risk that yourself." Alejandra willingly refers others for work, and she tries to make good matches, but she also asserts that she cannot be fully responsible for the job seeker's performance once hired.

Rosalba Diaz, a 38-year-old mother of two, spent several years working as the manager of a fabric shop in the center of the city. She said that when she was approached by job seekers she knew, Rosalba distanced herself. Normally, Rosalba's managerial duties included hiring and training new workers, but when the applicants were friends of hers, she sent them instead to her boss to be trained: "I don't want, because we are friends, for her to take advantage…Not linking together friendship with work, I was very careful." Rather than favoring her friends, Rosalba strove to appear neutral. "I wanted her to stay [and be hired] because of herself, not because of me, because in that case I was snatching away the opportunity from another person who truly wanted [the job], to have a friend [hired instead], and that is not correct, no. I think that is not correct." To preserve the friendships and avoid conflict, Rosalba never explained to her friends why she sent them to her boss instead of interviewing and training them herself. By doing so,

however, she provided enough assistance to maintain her friendships, and distanced herself enough from the hiring process so that her employer assumed responsibility.

Like contacts, employers also differentiated network members as safe bets, risky prospects, or blank slates. Freddy Hernandez, age 23, is a plumber who is sought by clients for residential projects. When he has multi-day projects that require two people, Freddy hires a friend or family member to work as his assistant. Freddy takes a cautious approach, selecting only "the most responsible people because I have friends who drink, who are hard-working but they like to go around, they are libertines, so I find the most serious person who is not a thief. Those people, my clients, are not going to like it if I steal a chair, a bicycle, so they are not going to seek me out [anymore]. So I have to find the most responsible person." Freddy relies on his reputation to find work, so he cannot risk hiring an untrustworthy assistant. Like contacts, employers also avoided telling job-seekers their true reasons for withholding work, instead choosing to lie about having job openings.

Conclusion

Job contacts play an essential role in the low-wage labor market, matching job seekers to open positions. Low-wage employers often recruit through referrals in the hope that they will find qualified and trustworthy employees. For a contact, giving a referral may enhance his reputation and strengthen existing relationships, but it also may damage his reputation or jeopardize his own employment if the outcome is negative. Thus, deciding whether to offer a referral represents the confluence of affective action (the emotional connection between contacts and job seekers), value-rational action (the duty to help others in need), traditional action (the norm of reciprocity) and instrumentally rational action (the need to reduce the risk and maximize the

benefit of a referral). How contacts approach this task is the subject of this chapter, which deploys the concept of relational work to examine how contacts interact with job-seekers and employers. All actors use relational work to construct, navigate, or dismantle the boundaries between the social and economic spheres (Zelizer 2012, Bandelj 2012). This relational work includes meaning making efforts as actors attempt to reconcile multiple conflicting means, ends, and motives.

Data on the 'worthy worker, ' presented in the previous chapter, show that reputation is about more than just trust; narratives of 'no vice' also indicate that reputation is about both employability *and* deservingness, which takes on a moral quality. Referrals are rational, but they are also relational. Contacts help those who are less risky, but also those who seem deserving and sympathetic. Reputation is more than a characteristic of a person, and more than the outcome of impression management efforts. For job-seekers in Leon, playing the reputation game involves building and mobilizing ties with neighbors, friends, and family members, which shape the outcome of the job search. This requires a delicate balance between being social and formal, between intimacy and over-familiarity. This is relational work. Mobilizing a tie is about navigating the boundary in such a way that one doesn't violate the taboo against using personal relationships for instrumental gain. But job-seekers cannot hide their instrumental purpose – they want a job and they must make this known to network members. The next chapter examines how the reputation game reflects and reproduces inequalities in Nicaraguan society, and it takes a closer look at the job-seekers who resist the reputation game.

Chapter 5: Power, Inequality, and Resistance in the Reputation Game

"I do not try to get ahead," said Domingo Alvarez, the 41-year-old day laborer we met in chapter one. When he says he does "not try to get ahead," Domingo means that he does not put his interests ahead of his employers' interests. He relies on neighbors and friends to refer him and hire him for small, temporary jobs, such as painting a house or fixing a wall. In addition to mobilizing network ties for referrals and jobs, Domingo also plays the reputation game by strenuously asserting his trustworthiness and deservingness of work. He describes how he tries to save employers money by preventing them from overbuying supplies. When asked how much he earns, he explains that he allows his prospective employer to offer the amount she is willing to pay because he fears that if he charges too high a rate, she will neither hire him nor recommend him to anyone else. He recounts a time when an employer tested his trustworthiness by leaving valuables around her house for him to find, and how he indignantly defended his honor. These accounts generate the impression that Domingo puts his employers' need and interests before his own, an impression that is intentionally cultivated by a man who relies on a steady supply of jobs for the survival of himself and his family.

Although job-seekers can also use referrals to screen out employers with negative reputations, the scarcity of jobs in León places greater power in the hands of employers. Those who need work desperately enough must endure difficult working conditions and, at times, abusive employers. Domingo told a story about how he was sought out for a painting job, but

the employer became violent: "for no reason, he hits me," Domingo said. So Domingo quit, telling the employer, "Here is your paint. It is better if I go." The employer became angry and threatened Domingo: "'You are going to see,' he said to me. 'Someday [you will be] asking me for work and I will deny it to you. 'From today on,' he tells me, 'realize and understand that with me you will not find work.'" In order to defend himself against the employer's abuse, Domingo must forego future job opportunities and referrals from this employer, illustrating that while workers are able to walk away from unacceptable working conditions, they pay a price for doing so. This chapter examines how the reputation game reinforces employer control over workers and reproduces social inequalities. Though the reputation game is pervasive, some workers actively resist it, through their search behavior and their narratives. This chapter also tells their stories.

Power and control in the reputation game

The reputation game encourages the control of workers through reputations and referrals. Worthy workers represent the employer's interests by being reliable and trustworthy. Worthy workers do not miss work, and they do not steal from their employers. Because the worthy worker truly needs work, she does not complain or make demands, and because she likes to work, she performs tasks outside of her job description and accepts low wages and long hours.

Esther Cardoza is a 50-year-old whose husband is unemployed. She cannot work outside her home because she cares for her daughter, who has a disability, so Esther takes in laundry from her neighbors or goes to their houses to do the wash. She explains that if she arrives to an

employer's house and the washing area[9] is full of dirty dishes, "I wash the dishes, I grab a broom, I sweep, and I leave it clean. Then I start washing [the clothes]. And this is not my job but I do it, you understand me? That is how you win people over." Esther's employers are also her neighbors; she has known them for years. Her relationship with them is social as well as economic, but the relationship is not equal because she relies on them for income. Therefore, if they leave dirty dishes in the area where she needs to wash their clothes, she must wash the dishes without complaint before she can continue with her work. By doing so, she said, she cultivates a name for herself based on her "service."

Moreover, the reputation game enlists contacts as agents of social control: because they are tasked with identifying deserving job candidates, their actions and words also reflect employers' interests. Fausto Mejia, a 29-year-old auto mechanic, said that his father is "very popular" because he does not charge his network members for his services: "If you ask him for a favor he does not say to you, 'how much are you going to pay me?' He does it, if you come and say, 'Here is 50 pesos,' [he will say] 'it is fine, thank you.'...But he is not one of the people who [does it] out of [self-] interest or something. He is not like that." In Fausto's telling of it, network members who ask Fausto for a favor are not taking advantage of him; instead, only a selfish person would demand payment. Fausto said his father gratefully accepts the money if it is offered, however, an indication that he does in fact need the money, but he is not empowered to ask for it or expect it.

[9] Instead of using washing machines, León residents often hand-wash clothes on a ribbed concrete slab called a *lavandero*, which is located next to the kitchen sink.

Contacts' reliance on positive referral outcomes for boosting their own reputational capital leads contacts to understate or ignore the power differential between employers and employees and favor the employer's perspective. Antonia Centeno is a spry 58-year-old who is employed full-time as a domestic. She said that she often is approached by other women in her neighborhood who are seeking referrals for domestic work. But Antonia said that she has denied referrals to job-seekers who have slept with their bosses: "They themselves have told me what they do in their jobs…So I say, how can I trust [them] if they have told me the things that they do in their jobs?...Sometimes they like to...how should I say, get together with the bosses and no, that is ugly...Imagine, because the girl is pretty, is beautiful, or because the lady of the house is already older, no." Although the power differential between employers and their domestic workers raises the question of whether consent is even possible, Antonia does not see it this way. From her perspective, what matters most is the job-seeker's reputation and her own reputation, leading her to deny job referrals to these job-seekers. Blaming the worker, not the employer, Antonia unwittingly reinforces the employer's power.

Even workers themselves defend the interests of employers who take advantage of them. Beatriz Carballo is a 64-year-old who worked as a seamstress and cook. She boasts of performing tasks outside of her job description and of being trustworthy with the cash register at her previous job in a restaurant. "I am not a woman who [says] if this is not my job I do not do it. I have to do it, I have to do it." This attitude won her employer's trust, allowing her to move from janitor to server to cashier, and she worked for the employer until he died and the business was sold by his sons. Afterward, Beatriz realized that she would not be eligible for a pension because her employer had not registered her: "The only bad thing was that...they did not insure

me...If I had been insured I would have my pension. The old man took the insurance [out of my wages], but he did not pay, and sometimes that happens. The bosses do not pay...So for that reason I am not retired from my job." Despite her disillusionment about her employer having deceived her about her retirement pension, she still boasts about her work ethic and honesty. By saying "sometimes that happens," Beatriz normalizes the self-interested actions of employers, even while rejecting the self-interested actions of workers.

Referral networks also assure worker discipline within the workplace. Denis, who co-owns a bakery, said that his workers "distribute the work, and among themselves they know who cooperates and who does not." Denis's employees have an incentive to help recruit motivated workers because doing so lightens their own burden. And workers who cultivate a positive work reputation on the job can improve his chances of getting job-finding assistance from a former co-worker in the future. Even beyond referral networks, the reputation game exerts a powerful force over workers. Mauricio owns a small taxi business that employs two drivers, and information about their job performance travels quickly back to Mauricio: "If he drives very fast, since people know me they tell me, 'look, that's your car, it carries a very misbehaved boy.'" Even though Mauricio cannot supervise his drivers directly, his ability to control them is enhanced by others in Mauricio's network who tell him about his employees' behavior.

Inequalities in the reputation game

Reputations generally are based upon observations of past behavior or secondhand accounts; however, as discussed above, they are also influenced by the observer's impressions, which are not only subjective but also shaped by social structure. Wilson notes that in one-shot exchanges,

actors draw upon general knowledge about similar others to make predictions about another's behavior (1985, p. 50). This general knowledge, called "presumptive reputation," adheres to groups rather than individuals. In León's low-wage labor market, employers and contacts drew upon job seekers' age, gender, and parental status to make inferences about their likely performance when they lacked personal knowledge of job applicants. Employers and contacts said they sought younger workers for physically demanding jobs. Denis, a bakery owner, said he employs mostly workers under 30 years old because the work is too physically demanding for older workers. As discussed above, however, young workers are also perceived as less willing to do hard labor, so low-wage employers like Denis need to find workers whose financial responsibilities require them to work.

Respondents also viewed younger workers as preferable for customer service jobs. In particular, employers seek young women to work in shops and supermarkets because they are considered the most physically attractive. Mayra Campos, 40, has been submitting applications to businesses around León, but she said she has been unsuccessful due to her age. "Now they only want girls of 19. So I have not been able to get [a job]." Esmeralda Romero, 32, echoed this sentiment, saying she cannot find a customer service job because she is not "young" or "pretty" enough.

Gender also shapes perceptions of worthiness. Teodoro owns two businesses – a cyber café and a bookstore. He said he seeks employees between 20 and 30 years old, and he tends to hire young men to work in the cyber café and young women to work in the bookstore. "For the cyber café I necessarily look for men, due to the schedule, because here there are two shifts and so I have preferred [to hire] men. And in the bookstore I have preferred [to hire] women." Jobs

with late shifts were described by respondents like Teodoro as inappropriate for women, even though the export-zone factory and restaurants employ women in late shifts. The occupational segregation in León is so pervasive that, when allocating job opportunities, employers and contacts specifically sought out either men or women to fill jobs.

For job seekers, parenthood is a double edged sword. While contacts expressed skepticism that childless workers would exert themselves on the job, some employers see job seekers with children as a potential headache. Teodoro said he prefers to hire workers without children. "I prefer young people and preferably without commitments, that is if they are single, much better...or if married not so problematic. It has occurred that they get married, have children, the children get sick, and the problem is that there is only one worker…so it is a lost day of work." Because his store cannot operate if the employee stays home for any reason, Teodoro does not want to recruit women with children. (Notably, Teodoro did not mention fathers.) Because the jobs Teodoro offers are less demanding than many of the low-wage occupations in León, he is confident he can find young single people willing to do the work, even without financial responsibilities. In this way, parents can be denied access to favorable jobs and driven toward the most demanding ones.

Women workers have a presumptive reputation for unreliability due to their greater parental responsibilities; even married women often shoulder full responsibility for the care of children. When Ingrid Bonilla, a 33-year-old married mother of two, obtained a job in the export-zone factory, she hired another woman to care for her children while Ingrid worked. Ultimately, though, the caretaker was forced to quit because the job interfered with her own domestic duties. Ingrid said, "Her husband did not want her to [work] anymore because it was

very early. She had to get her children ready for classes too. Sometimes we say that girls don't want to work, but we also have to see what the necessity of each home is. She has her children, she has to get them ready to go to classes and the starting time here was very early so she could not, she had to leave [the job]." Female respondents reported quitting jobs due to scheduling conflicts or family illnesses, whereas the men reported quitting jobs in order to seek better opportunities elsewhere.

In sum, workers carry group-based presumptive reputations in addition to their individual reputations. When employers and contacts lack information about a job-seeker, they rely on this presumptive information to make decisions. Presumptive reputations have an intersectional character, composed of age, gender, and parenthood status: Job seekers who come from poor families or who have children to support are viewed as more responsible and willing to work. Mothers of young children are seen as less reliable due to their family responsibilities, but young women without children are preferred for jobs in shops and supermarkets due to their attractiveness. These characteristics shape others' perceptions of a job seeker's worthiness of employment, thereby shaping their employment opportunities.

In theory, a person's reputation is based on her actual past behavior. Often, however, observers make heuristic judgements about individuals based on their membership in groups, to which assumptions and attitudes are attached. Sometimes job seekers failed to find work because of their membership in groups with negative reputations, and job-seekers had a better shot at finding work if they were a member of a group that is viewed positively, such as a "good family." Thus, in this labor market where referrals and reputations drive employability, the reputation game is not an equal playing field. The language of the reputation game is largely

meritocratic, ascribing great agency to job-seekers. But this discourse obscures the way in which job seekers' reputations, and therefore their employability, are out of their control.

Resisting the reputation game

As discussed in chapter two, the discourse of León's low-wage labor market emphasizes the job-seeker's reputation and deservingness, and as demonstrated in chapter three, job-seekers rely heavily on referrals from network members to find work. This system, as argued above, serves to control workers and favor the interests of employers. Although the reputation game is pervasive, it is not total – 28 percent of the job searches reported were sought directly, meaning that the job-seeker approached the employer on his own, without a referral. In 30 percent of these searches, the job-seeker received information about how to apply. Job-seekers applying directly reported that they approached security guards working outside of businesses for information about open positions and application procedures. Job-seekers also asked workers for copies of paper applications they could fill out, or they sought information about which documents they were required to submit. In 5 percent of the searches, job applicants received a letter of recommendation from a neighbor, family friend, or former employer.[10] For the remaining 65 percent of direct searches, job-seekers reported receiving no assistance.

Direct search was not uncommon – half of respondents had searched directly at least once. Nearly half – 49 percent – of the direct searches reported resulted in a job in León, and 44 percent of direct searches were unsuccessful. (The remaining 7 percent had an unknown

[10] Despite receiving a reference letter as a form of assistance, these searches were coded as "direct" and not "network-based" because there was no existing tie between the letter-writer and the employer. Only searches where a tie exists between the contact and employer were coded as network-based.

outcome, because the respondent was a contact who was not sure whether the job-seeker to whom they gave information or a letter of reference was hired.) In essence, applying directly for a job is a little like flipping a coin. In contrast, most of the searches in which the job-seeker received a referral – 78 percent – resulted in a job in León. Because direct search was so prevalent, not all direct search should be interpreted as resistance to the reputation game. Indeed, job-seekers usually employ mixed search strategies. But a subset of respondents used primarily direct search, and they deployed narratives and behaviors that diverged from the themes of the reputation game.

One way to look at direct searchers is to see them as unfortunate people who are locked out of referral networks. Indeed, a person's network is shaped by events outside her control, such as war or migration. But the residents of León displayed a tremendous amount of resilience and agency in the face of difficult circumstances, building and re-building supportive networks amidst social upheaval and family tragedy. Donald Castillo, the 25-year-old electrician who works odd jobs, arrived in León five years ago with few connections. He had grown up in the countryside with his grandmother after he and his siblings were abandoned by their parents. When his grandmother died, Donald was evicted from her house by his aunts and uncles, so he moved to León, where his mother had resettled. As Donald tells it, she had remarried, and her new husband wanted nothing to do with him. So Donald befriended a man who lived nearby and began attending an Evangelical church. The neighbor taught him how to install wiring and repair appliances, and he took Donald along on his jobs. Donald met his wife at church; now he works intermittently as an electrician, receiving referrals from his wife's network, and he teaches a

weekly Bible class for children at his church. Though he has little contact with his siblings and his father is in prison, Donald has managed to build a network that sustains him.

Just as people exert agency in building and mobilizing referral networks, they exert agency in renouncing them. Another way to look at direct searching is to see it as a choice – as an effort by job-seekers to escape the reputation game. Some respondents resisted the reputation game in word, by emphasizing their rights as workers instead of their deservingness and by questioning the employer's prerogatives, and in deed, by eschewing referral networks in favor of direct searching or self-employment. Below, I examine the stories of four of the job-seekers whose narratives and search behavior diverged from the general pattern I observed in León's reputation game.

"I think it was unjust": Estela Fernandez, 24

Estela Fernandez is a 24-year-old who dropped out of high school after her second year. A married mother of two, she lives with her husband and in-laws. She obtained her first job, at a supermarket, through a friend: "One day I was out in the street. She asked me... 'Do you want to work?' So I told her yes, so she told me to present myself at human resources in the [supermarket] and to say that I came recommended by her...and they hired me because there was an open position." Estela's friend, a former neighbor, had worked at the supermarket for more than a year, and she was seeking assistants to work in the kitchen. Echoing the language of the reputation game, Estela explained that her friend recommended her because "I am [a person] of good manners who was not going to make her look bad." But Estela quit the job after two weeks. She explained "the whole day would pass and they had not fulfilled what they told me, that I would get out one day at six [p.m.] and another day at three [p.m.]. In addition to that, I

had my youngest son...he was six months old and you know I could not leave a small child for that long...And they gave me more work than what they had told me, and with the same pay, so I decided to quit that job." Moreover, she said that the monthly wage of 3,500 córdobas (less than $150) was too low. For Estela, a worker without a high school degree, the long hours and low pay were unfair and unacceptable. She did not explain to her contact her reasons for quitting, nor did she seek her friend's approval. Estela's husband was employed at the time, so they were financially stable enough so that she could leave the job and take time off to raise her son.

Since then, Estela has not received more job offers through referrals. Preferring self-employment, Estela attempted to start a small business after quitting her supermarket job, but she was unable to turn a profit and could not repay the micro-loan she took out. So her husband left his job at the export-zone factory in order to pay off her debt with his severance payment. Finding her family without a steady income, Estela decided to return to wage work. For her second job, she heard about a dental assistant position from her sister-in-law, who heard an announcement on the radio. She approached the employer directly to apply and was hired. "They taught me for a week," Estela said. "It was pretty hard because I did not know anything about it, and they demanded a lot of me. In the end I learned everything...I put a lot of effort on my part."

Estela quit this job too, after nine months, for a litany of reasons: "The boss had a bad character, [he was] used to yelling at his wife and kids and he also wanted to do it to me." They asked her to travel to Managua on the weekends but did not pay her extra. They did not let her eat lunch until late in the afternoon. Moreover, Estela explained, conflicts arose with her employer's teenage children when they took her cell phone without asking. "I left my phone in

the office, but since there was a door to the house, the children were annoying and they took things. And they were not little people, they were thirteen and eighteen...The boss got angry, but I think it was unjust, because he needed to educate his children." Estela's story about her employer's children flips the usual reputation narrative on its head: instead of a worker insisting she would never touch her employer's things, she complains that her employer transgressed by touching her possessions. For Estela, the imbalance of power between her and her employer does not give him the right to mistreat her. She is not the only one who needs to fulfill her obligations, to be trustworthy and deserving. Workers like Estela insist that employers should fulfill their end of the bargain, too.

For each of her subsequent job searches, Estela applied to employers directly, without referrals. She said she never asked anyone for help finding work, and she preferred not to discuss her search with anyone because "if I talk to people, they do not solve anything. They ridicule your problems or gossip and in the end we are in the same place." She had applied, unsuccessfully, to shops and restaurants, but she was employed at the time of the interview. Estela was working at the export-zone factory, on the assembly line. She said the eight-hour shifts allowed time to spend with her children, and the wage – 3,800 córdobas – was decent. For workers like Estela, who eschew the reputation-building and relational work of the reputation game, large employers like the factory offer a way to obtain employment without playing the game.

"I like to be independent": Sara Gomez, 25

Sara Gomez is a 25-year-old mother of three who obtained her first job at the export-zone factory. She says she left after a year due to the burdens of the overnight shift. Next she was

hired to work in a clothing shop, after seeing a "help wanted" sign. She left that job too, due to late nights during the holiday season. She worked a seasonal stint for the peanut processor before going to work at a clothing shop owned by a relative of her former employer. Sara does not seek referrals, nor does she give them. "I like to be independent, so no one tells me anything," she said with a laugh. "I feel it is better that way."

Sara embraces the discourse of the worthy worker – she says she "likes to work," and she says it is important for workers to hold on to their jobs and appreciate them. She calls herself responsible and says that any work is more dignified than a life of crime. But she only searches directly, and she leaves employers when she wants to. Rather than seeking referrals, she obtains letters of reference from former employers as well as letters of reference from neighbors. Letters of reference, it should be noted, carry less risk than referrals do. Employers are less concerned about their reputations among other employers – one employer told me she gave a bad employee a letter of reference just to be rid of him. At the time of the interview Sara was unemployed, but she was planning to return to the peanut processor for another season. Sara lives with her mother and sisters, so housing is not a problem. During bouts of unemployment, Sara helps her children's grandmother, who has a stall at the market, to earn income. Due to the closeness of the tie, Sara does not refer to this arrangement as an employment relation, but rather as mutual assistance. Unlike other respondents, Sara's mother has a postsecondary education and a professional job. Her network resources make it possible for her to endure unemployment.

"A slacker since I was little": Jaime Lopez, 26

When I sat down with Jaime to interview him, he pulled out a keychain with his picture on it. He was wearing a cap and gown. He told me proudly that he had recently finished high school, after

dropping out for several years. The next thing he said was, "Lots of alcohol, lots of drugs. A slacker." He was talking about himself.

At eight years old, he said, he worked at a neighbor's bar for three córdobas (roughly 12 cents) per day. At thirteen, he began working at his grandfather's block factory, where he earned "20 or 30" córdobas (roughly one dollar) per day. At fifteen, he worked as an assistant to his brother, doing construction jobs. At seventeen, he told me, he sold marijuana on a corner, but he decided to stop because he felt it was too dangerous. Then, Jaime explained, he rebelled against his mother and joined the army. But he only lasted one year. "They dismissed me because they could not stand me. I was very annoying... I did not listen, I was insubordinate. I needed discipline. I was undisciplined more than anything. They could not stand me." Jaime could have framed events differently, but he chose to tell the version of his story that makes himself seem less trustworthy, less reliable.

Last year, Jaime continued, he was unable to attend his graduation because he was imprisoned. "They were putting me in for robbery," he said. "But it was not me." He was in the park with friends one day, he said, when they saw someone steal a woman's purse. When the police arrived, they accused Jaime. He stayed in jail for a month before being released. The experience was not that bad, Jaime explained, because he had friends on the inside. Since being released, he has tried to apply directly for jobs in bars, factories, and security firms, with no success. He said employers will not accept him because he is covered with tattoos, which in León is frowned upon because tattoos are associated with gangs.

Jaime's narrative, unlike Estela's, does not assert his rights as a worker; instead, Jaime asserts his freedom as an individual. He expresses little interest in building or maintaining a

reputation or a network of contacts: He freely offers up stories that portray him in a negative light, and he said he has few friends and distant relations with his extended family. He even recounted a time when his uncle dropped a fifty-córdoba bill on the ground and Jaime, instead of returning it, surreptitiously took it and kept it. Although Jaime rejects the reputation game and the social control it entails, he has not been able to obtain work through direct application. At the time of the interview, Jaime was working at his brother's barber shop, cutting hair. He wanted to continue studying, but he did not have a plan to do so. He talked about starting a business, but he did not have a plan for that, either.

Although Jaime seemed more interested in shocking me during the interview than he was in demonstrating his trustworthiness, he did insist that he was not responsible for the robbery of which he was accused. None of the crimes and transgressions he copped to involved violence, giving the impression that Jaime is extremely rebellious, but mostly harmless, and, above all, authentic. How did he come to be this way? While it is difficult to say for certain, one factor could be the fact that Jaime's father lived in the United States, along with most of his family. Jaime recalls being visited by his father and paternal cousins when they returned from the States; they brought gifts, money, and stories. But when Jaime was seventeen, his father passed away. "When he was alive, he sent us [money]. We hardly had to work...but when he died, [we had] to work." Having family abroad gave Jaime contacts, resources, and cultural scripts that were not locally based, freeing him, his mother, and his siblings from the reputation game. His father's death thrust them into the labor market in earnest, without the contacts and reputations they needed. Jaime's mother started a salon; his older brother started the barber shop and hired Jaime. This lifeline of family obligation allows Jaime to continue resisting.

"We all have need": Mariela Rojas, 32

Mariela Rojas is a 32-year-old divorced mother of two with a high school degree. She has worked a dozen jobs. She found her first job when she heard an announcement for a job opening as a saleswoman for an optician. "The pay was not too good because I earned ten pesos for each contract I made, that is if I made [contracts] I earned and if I did not make [contracts] I did not earn. All day in the sun, suffering hunger because you don't eat well in the streets. I left because the pay was not stable." Mariela had taken the commission-based job because it was all she could find at the moment, but as soon as a more stable job came along she left. The next job she found, at a pizzeria, she obtained by applying directly, after seeing a 'now hiring' sign posted outside. Mariela left this job after one year because the business was open late, and Mariela said that returning home after 10 p.m. left her no time to spend with her young daughter. She heard from her father about an opening at a fast-food restaurant, so Mariela applied and was hired for the morning shift. After working there for nearly two years, she migrated to the United States with the help of her brother, who helped her to obtain a job at a restaurant. Mariela said that her employers, who were also Nicaraguan, treated her well. "They know the need one goes through here, all we Nicaraguans go through. They gave me the opportunity, they gave me even their house to live in with them, and they treated me well, thank God...they did not look down on me. They saw me as one of their family." Three years later, she returned to care for her daughter, who had stayed behind and who fallen ill.

Later, when her daughter had recovered, Mariela obtained a job at the export-zone factory, to which she applied directly. She said she left after a year due to the working conditions. "There is no time to heat your food that you bring from your house at five in the

morning. You have lunch at noon and the food is completely cold. I did not like it because there you work under pressure, and the treatment they give workers is not good...They do not let you even drink water. I was sick and I had to leave." Her next job, obtained without a referral, was at a peanut processor. There, too, Mariela found the working conditions to be too strenuous. Since then, Mariela has applied directly for several jobs at restaurants and supermarkets, without success. "My mother says it is because of my age, but I think I am still young. I am 32, and I can do any job because I have no vice and I like to work." Mariela's statements about herself echo the themes of the reputation game. Though necessary, these statements alone are not sufficient.

Mariela was seeking work at the time of the interview. She said she talked to everyone: "Even with people I do not know, I ask them, 'look, I see that you have your job, are they looking for workers there?'...But they always give you a 'but'...out of selfishness, or maybe because she wants to give the job to a family member." Mariela recalled that she asked an acquaintance, who worked in a supermarket, for help, but she was rebuffed. "I did not like it because...if I start to work somewhere and there is someone, even if they are not my friend, and they are looking for work, I will tell them...because we all need [work]." Although most respondents expressed a preference for helping friends, neighbors, and family – people they knew well and could trust – Mariela rejects the legitimacy of this preference for close relations. Instead, she asserts, people who are not "selfish" should be willing to help anyone who needs work. Mariela embraces the discourse of the reputation game, asserting her worthiness and need, but she rejects the other side of the game – the cultivation of referral networks and the relational

work it entails. She sought all of her previous jobs directly, giving her the freedom to quit when she wanted to. Mariela, like Jaime, has family living abroad, so her network is less localized.

"It is their problem": Lorenzo Peralta, 55

Resistance to the reputation game was not limited to younger workers. Lorenzo Peralta is a 55-year-old security guard who did not complete high school because, he said, he did not like to study. As a teenager, he obtained his first job in León's cotton industry, which was booming in the 1970s. His brother, who worked as a mechanic, helped Lorenzo get the job. What started as a temporary position became permanent and he worked there for several years, Lorenzo said, due to his "good behavior." "I behaved well in my job, and so they let me work for so many years there." He left that job to take another in Managua, as a welder for a state-run cooperative. The manager, whom Lorenzo had worked with before, offered him a higher wage. But Lorenzo left that job after two years due to a conflict with the employer over hours and wages. He then went into business with his younger brother, selling clothing directly to customers. Their business was going well until the early 1990s, when Cerro Negro volcano spewed ash that covered the city of León. Lorenzo upset his customers by attempting to collect on their debt in the wake of the disaster. "The people really got angry," Lorenzo recalled. "I did not have money, and I had a child," he explained. "I had to go collect." Lorenzo and his brother closed the business.

Afterward, Lorenzo began to work as a security guard in a neighborhood; each resident paid a weekly fee for his services. "All the people loved me because I was always very responsible," he said. Lorenzo left the job "because there were people who did not want to pay. And they said, 'come at this time.' I do not like that, 'come at this time'...Then they said, 'are you not going to come collect?' 'So you are telling me what time I have to collect from you,' I

said. How horrible." Since then, Lorenzo has continued to work as a security guard, and he has applied for jobs directly. He has held four different positions as a security guard, including his current one; he left the other jobs due to conflicts with supervisors or complaints over hours and wages. He said he does not ask network members for help finding work, nor does he provide referrals to others: "I do not help anyone...The guys here tell me... 'Can you help me?' But no, I am not going to recommend them...It is their problem...I do not get involved in any of that anymore." Just as Lorenzo used to receive referrals, he said he used to help others, too. Lorenzo's narrative echoes the themes of deservingness – he insists he has no vice and is responsible. But, like Estela, he asserts his rights as a worker. Like Jaime and Mariela, Lorenzo shows little interest in referral networks; he exercises his freedom to leave jobs. His refusal to give referrals indicates that he recognizes that he lacks control over the job-seekers, and he too resists the reputation game's system of control.

Lorenzo's trajectory surely was shaped by broader historical events and trends; he has lived through the revolution, a civil war, economic crisis, structural reform, and social and technological change, which have shaped both Lorenzo's network and his outlook. The brother who connected Lorenzo to his first job emigrated to the U.S. in 1981; for many Nicaraguans, the revolution and civil war altered their networks (Lancaster 1996; see Bastani 2007 for a discussion of post-revolutionary Iran). Lorenzo, like other men of his age who completed their military service, is able to handle a firearm. Just as the export-zone factory gives young women a source of jobs to which they can apply directly, security firms provide a source of employment that men can obtain without referrals.

The social structure of resistance

Although the reputation game is the broader context in which job-seekers' strategies play out, these strategies are necessarily shaped by age, gender, occupation, and other factors. In gender-segregated labor markets, personal characteristics map onto occupations, leading to different search strategies for different groups. In this sample, men and women were equally likely to search directly: 49 percent of men and 51 percent of women in the sample had approached an employer directly at least once. Younger workers were more likely than older workers to report seeking work in this way: Among men and women age 40 and younger, 64 percent had approached an employer directly; among men and women over 40, 37.5 percent had approached an employer directly.

Women under age 40 used direct search the most (68%), followed by younger men (60%) and men over 40 (40%). Thus, the ability to resist the reputation game is uneven. Younger women can seek work directly in the shops, restaurants, and export factory, regardless of their reputations and networks. In contrast, older women reported that they had far fewer job opportunities in León, beyond domestic work. And domestic work lies so squarely on the invisible boundary between the intimate sphere and the market that relational work and reputation-building are all but impossible to avoid. Women over 40 reported direct search the least; only 35 percent said they had approached employers directly. Moreover, only eight women age 55 or older had searched directly for a job. Because the data is retrospective, this includes people who used direct approach earlier in their work history. For example, 55-year-old

Macy Ortiz used direct search twice, to get a receptionist job at age 16 and to work in a shop in her twenties.

The costs of resistance

Direct search offers benefits for job-seekers. Job-seekers applying directly do not need to ask for assistance from network members, and job-seekers who are hired directly are free to leave a job when they please, without justifying their actions. This frees them from control by contacts and employers, which is the essence of the reputation game. But the greater autonomy provided by direct search carries a price for job-seekers as well. One disadvantage of direct search is that collecting the necessary application materials can be costly and time consuming, and the effort may not produce employment. Job-seekers applying directly usually need to submit a police record and a medical record along with their applications. More importantly, workers who apply directly are unable to screen out abusive employers or obtain pertinent information about the job beforehand. Respondents like Mariela reported difficult working conditions in jobs they obtained through direct search.

Job-seekers who obtain jobs directly also may be more vulnerable to abuse and wage theft. Sol Mendoza, 29, applied for domestic work after seeing a "help wanted" sign on a house. Sol did not know the employer or receive a referral, but she was hired and worked in the employer's house for several months. However, Sol said she quit after the employer stopped paying her wages. "[They said] 'we'll pay you next week, next month.' And it was accumulating, accumulating, and in the end they owed me and they weren't paying me." Because no one had vouched for either party, it was Sol's word against her employer's, and she

never recovered her lost wages. Sol was unemployed at the time of the interview. In a context where formal institutions cannot be counted upon to resolve disputes between workers and employers, contacts provide a bridge that facilitates not only the spread of information but the formation of trust. Without contacts to span the divide, employers and job-seekers alike take greater risks.

Conclusion

A paradox of social life is that people want autonomy, but in order to achieve it they must forge connections with others (McLean 2007). This paradox cuts both ways: In order to build, maintain, or mobilize connections, actors must give up some of their autonomy. This is exemplified by the social control exerted over workers and job-seekers by their referral networks. Where there is interdependence, there is social control – because there is a need for social control when one person's actions affect others in myriad ways. The reputation game is a prime example of this: if a driver drinks on the job, his employer can get in trouble. If a woman recommends a friend as a domestic and she steals, it affects her own reputation as well. From this perspective, the social control involved in the reputation game serves the interests not only of employers, but it also serves the labor market and the community as a whole by facilitating the formation of trust. If contacts have no control over job-seekers, they become wary of them. If employers have no control over contacts, they have little reason to trust their recommendations. The reputation game facilitates the smooth operation of the low-wage labor market by coordinating the interests of workers, contacts, and employers.

Nevertheless, the balance of power between workers and employers is not equal; the reputation game subordinates the interests of workers and contacts to the interests of employers. For workers, cultivating a positive reputation often requires putting the interests of contacts and employers before their own. According to Emerson's (1959) power-dependency theory, power resides in dyadic relations in which one actor depends upon another. Sooner or later, Emerson suggests, the more-powerful actor will attempt to extract from the dependent actor something that the dependent actor will not want to give. In León's low-wage labor market, some employers gradually add work tasks to their employees' job descriptions, or they fire them without paying their earned wages. As discussed in the previous chapter, workers who have received referrals use relational work to extract themselves from bad jobs while keeping their reputations intact. And the discourse of the reputation game places emphasis on the job-seeker's deservingness, not her rights as a worker.

As Sharone (2013) points out, one cannot play a game and question its rules simultaneously. Job-seekers in León do not openly question the reputation game, but some do resist its forces. They resist the reputation game by eschewing referral networks in favor of direct search or self-employment. But, for many unskilled workers, resistance has a price: job-seekers have no way to filter out abusive employers, and they may be relegated to the worst jobs.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The features of León's low-wage labor market generate vulnerabilities for employers and workers alike, creating a need for trust between employers and workers. This need for trust manifests as a reliance on referrals to match workers to jobs, and the constant search for work leads to the preeminence of reputation as an abiding ethic. I refer to their strategies, practices, and discourses as the reputation game. Winning the reputation game means building a positive reputation and obtaining referrals from network members, which requires intensive relational work. As a result, job search behavior barely resembles job searching; instead, job information is shared in the context of socializing, visiting, and casual public encounters. Winning the game also means overcoming negative group reputations and navigating gendered expectations. In Leon's low-wage labor market, there are few formal organizations for instilling the discourses and practices of the reputation game. Rather, parents teach their children, and older workers teach younger workers about the importance of trustworthiness.

Because the discourse of the reputation game places the employer's interests over the job-seekers', winning the reputation game does not necessarily entail an ideal labor market outcome for job seekers. Thus, it is possible to say that there is no such thing as *winning* the reputation game. One merely plays it, in order to survive. Job-seekers like Domingo Alvarez use the phrase "God squeezes you, but he doesn't choke you" to convey their experiences as precarious urban workers: The reputation game offers just enough work to survive, and

attributes just enough agency to job-seekers to keep them from giving up in discouragement, but it never relaxes its grip on their throats.

Is Nicaragua's experience comparable to that of other societies? Can we expect to find elements of the reputation game in other contexts? The features of Nicaragua's urban labor market that give rise to the reputation game – instability, informality, low wages, lack of surveillance, and lack of credentials – are common in other low-income countries (World Bank 2014). For this reason, I would expect to find the reputation game in cities throughout Latin America, as well as in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Indeed, a study of working-class youth in Iran indicates that young workers carefully cultivate positive reputations in hopes of securing employment in a difficult labor market: according to Hashemi (2015), young unemployed men and women cultivate networks and strive to demonstrate to others that they are deserving of economic opportunities. Where León differs from other cities is its high level of residential stability. Latin America urbanized during the 20th century (Roberts 1995), so many of León's adult residents are second- or third- generation residents, and they have lived in their neighborhoods for years. Residential stability allows for the formation of neighborhood-based social ties and for the development of reputations. In cities experiencing more recent growth and higher residential mobility, referral-based hiring is still important, but instead of neighbors providing a large share of the referrals and hiring assistance, family and friends provide a larger share of referrals (see Elliott and Sims 2001), and relationships are formed in organizational contexts rather than in neighborhoods (see Small 2009).

Existing studies of the low-wage labor market in the United States suggest that a version of the reputation game is played here. In Smith's study of low-income black job-seekers, the

majority of respondents reported receiving job-finding assistance from a network member, and her respondents stressed the importance of a positive reputation – or at least the absence of a negative one. When the job-seeker was perceived as a risky prospect, the contact offered information only, not a referral (Smith 2005, 2007, 2010). Other studies have documented the widespread use of contacts to find low-wage work in the United States, and friends and family members provide most of the assistance (Elliott and Sims 2001). And studies of low-wage employers find that they seek workers who are malleable and easy to control (Shih 2002). All of this suggests that even in post-industrial economies, despite the presence of job-matching institutions and sophisticated surveillance technology, low-wage workers play a version of the reputation game. In cities with a greater availability of low-wage jobs, we would expect the control aspect of the reputation game to have a looser hold on workers and job-seekers. Networks are still efficient at matching workers to jobs in tight labor markets, but they are less able to discipline workers and job-seekers.

Studies of the low-wage labor market in the United States tend to focus on racial differences in search strategies and outcomes. It has been observed that Hispanic or Latino job-seekers use networks more than whites and blacks do (Elliott and Sims 2001, Falcón and Melendez 2001, Falcón 1995). Some scholars have attempted to explain this difference in terms of cultural differences: Smith and Young (2016) argue that black workers deploy a cultural logic of "defensive individualism" and tend to provide information without referrals. Whites deploy a "matchmaking" logic that emphasizes fit, and Latinos and Asians deploy a cultural logic of "particularism" and are most likely to give referrals. The origins of these cultural logics, however, are left unexplored. Elsewhere, Smith argues that Latinos emphasize "sincerity" when

assessing job-seekers asking for help (2010). In her study of low-wage job-seekers in Harlem, Katherine Newman observes that Latinos mobilize network ties for a wide array of resources, from housing to jobs. She observes that first-generation Latino immigrants come from societies where "there is little pretense of fairness. Whom you know dictates most aspects of where you end up in life" (1999, p. 236). Again, the question of why "there is little pretense of fairness" in Latin American countries, and why it promotes networked search, is left unanswered. This study, by providing an in-depth look at the urban labor market of a migrant-sending country, fills in this gap by illuminating how these logics and scripts are generated. I have attempted to show here that Nicaraguans' emphasis on network referrals and reputations arises from a labor market context lacking in formal institutions and employment arrangements. This context makes employers and workers vulnerable, making trust between them essential. Hence, job-seekers must form and mobilize network ties, and they must cultivate positive reputations.

To make this argument, I have drawn from Sharone's (2013) insight that job search strategies are not the product of a generalized, immutable national culture but rather are the product of institutional arrangements that structure risks and rewards. In Sharone's comparison of Israel and the United States, Israeli tech workers changed their search habits when they migrated to the United States in order to accommodate the hiring institutions in their new context. The fact that Latino low-wage workers use network contacts heavily in the U.S. context suggests that the low-wage labor market of the U.S. is also a reputation game, and the strategies Latin Americans develop for finding work in their societies of origin serve them very well in the U.S. Latino job-seekers' language abilities or documentation status cannot fully explain their heavy use of referrals for searching, because my study shows that in a sending country, where

workers and employers speak the same language and workers are citizens, they search the same way. In contrast, native-born American workers, who are accustomed to the more institutionalized nature of the U.S. labor market, may prefer to seek work through websites, job-finding centers (Smith 2007) or directly approaching employers (Sharone 2013, Newman 1999), in order to avoid burdening network members with requests. An individualistic approach to searching may seem cultural at first blush, but that stance would not be possible without institutions to facilitate direct searches. Such institutions, while designed to facilitate job matching, may in fact be harmful to job-seekers. Smith found that the job-center she studied reproduced inequalities (2007), and Sharone found that a coaching agency perpetuated narratives that led job-seekers to blame themselves for their unemployment (2013). Job-seekers who utilize institutions believe they are engaging in fruitful job search activity, when their interests may be better served by spending time cultivating personal relationships. Native-born job-seekers also may be more accustomed to a social safety net that alleviates some of the deprivations from unemployment, but as that safety net is continuously eroded, Americans will need their networks more than ever.

Decades ago, Granovetter's study of "weak ties" spawned a new field of "networking," as professionals attempt to build large, loose networks for job information. Perhaps what low-wage workers need is not feel-good seminars about finding their passions, or individualistic narratives about building their skill sets, or self-help advice about how to ask strangers for job opportunities, but rather policies that encourage organizational involvement and the formation of stable neighborhoods. For example, Small (2009) found that childcare centers encouraged the formation of supportive ties among low-income mothers. Indeed, community organizations

facilitate the formation of networks and trust. But I have shown that even communities with low levels of organizational involvement can encourage network formation among neighbors, when residential stability is high and businesses are located among residences and are visited frequently. As more Americans shop online and move frequently in search of affordable rent or better opportunities, community-based networks become harder to form and maintain. The instability of work and family life gives rise to what Allison Pugh calls the Tumbleweed Society (2016). Referral networks are less necessary when low-wage jobs are abundant, but in times and places where jobs are scarce, having connections is essential. Given the dubious ability of existing policy instruments to create jobs, building vibrant and stable neighborhoods, organizations, and families may be an equally worthy goal. Such efforts would not only benefit low-income workers: the prevalence of referral bonuses among white-collar employers suggests that employers at all levels value referrals from employees. But such referrals are unlikely to come from the strangers one encounters in seminars and conferences. Moreover, American-style networking is experienced by job-seekers as awkward and uncomfortable (Lane 2001, Sharone 2014).

Network-based recruitment is often considered "backward" or traditional, compared with the rational, modern approach of selecting the most qualified applicant from an applicant pool. On the surface, referral-based hiring appears to be nepotistic, or at the very least unfair, and is seen by many job-seekers as a last resort (see Yakubovich 2005, Sharone 2014). Referral-based hiring exacerbates network-based inequalities and excludes those with smaller or less resource-rich networks. But it is also apparent that the "modern" system of applying for jobs is experienced by job-seekers as dehumanizing and frustrating, and it leads to self-blame and

discouragement (Sharone 2014). Online job boards do not allow seekers to set themselves apart, and the disproportionate role of the interview in the hiring process requires "deep acting" that exhausts and worries job seekers. On the employer side, the system is also overwhelming for hiring managers, who must contend with an overabundance of applicants, many of whom have similar qualifications, about which some applicants are surely lying. Referral-based hiring is, by comparison, highly efficient. Job seekers can blend search activity with other regular social activity, and employers can find a suitable worker quickly without sifting through a mountain of applications. At the same time, referrals offer contacts the chance to do two favors at once, by helping the employer and the job seeker. All of this suggests that just because referrals are low-tech, this does not make them irrational, and just because they are interpersonal, this does not make them corrupt. The reputation game is pervasive and persistent because it efficiently matches workers to jobs, and because it serves employers' interests.

The future of the reputation game

As technology advances, educational attainment increases, and labor markets change, the question is raised of how the reputation game will be affected in the future. The availability of factory work in León, combined with discourses about worker rights (bequeathed from the days of the Sandinista Revolution), have generated resistance to the reputation game, but they have not defeated or replaced it. While increasing educational attainment leads job-seekers to emphasize skills and credentials, rather than honor and work ethic, as signals of deservingness, the labor market of León has so far been slow to absorb these educated workers, who must also rely on networks to find scarce jobs. The rising expectations of social mobility that accompany

educational attainment, if left unfulfilled, can lead to political unrest, cynicism, or outward migration. Less-skilled workers will continue to play the reputation game, despite the spread of surveillance technology such as security cameras. Cameras assist in the control of workers once hired, and they can help recuperate stolen items, but they cannot filter trustworthy job candidates from untrustworthy ones. Contacts remain the most efficient mechanism for screening applicants, as long as trust is needed.

References

Akerlof, George. 1970. "The Market for Lemons: Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 84: 488-500.

Bandelj, Nina. "Relational work and economic sociology." *Politics & Society* 40.2 (2012): 175-201.

Bandelj, Nina. "Thinking about Social Relations in Economy as Relational Work." *Re-Imagining Economic Sociology* (2015): 227-251.

Bastani, Susan. 2007. ‘‘Family Comes First: Men’s and Women’s Personal Networks in Tehran,’’ *Social Networks* 29(3): 357–374.

Bian, Yanjie. 1997. “Bringing strong ties back in: Indirect ties, network bridges, and job searches in China.” *American Sociological Review* 62: 366-385.

Bian, Yanjie. 1999. “Getting a Job Through a Web of Guanxi in China.” Pp. 255-278 in *Networks in the Global Village*, ed. Barry Wellman. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Bian, Yanjie, Xianbi Huang, and Lei Zhang. 2015. "Information and favoritism: The network effect on wage income in China." *Social Networks* 40: 129-138.

Blau, Peter M. 1964. *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

Block, Fred. "Relational work in market economies: Introduction." *Politics & Society* 40.2 (2012): 135-144.

Castilla, Emilio, George J. Lan Ben A. Rissing. 2013a. “Social Networks and Employment: Mechanisms (Part 1).” Sociology Compass 7(12): 999-1012

Castilla, Emilio, George J. Lan Ben A. Rissing. 2013b. “Social Networks and Employment: Outcomes (Part 2).” Sociology Compass 7(12): 999-1012

Chan, Cheris Shun-Ching. 2009. "Invigorating the Content in Social Embeddedness: An Ethnography of Life Insurance Transactions in China." *American Journal of Sociology* 115.3: 712-754.

Coleman, James S. 1988. “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital.” *The American Journal of Sociology* 94:95-120.

Desmond, Matthew. "Disposable Ties and the Urban Poor." *American Journal of Sociology* 117.5 (2012): 1295-1335.

Dohan, Daniel. 2003. *The price of poverty: Money, work, and culture in the Mexican American barrio.* Berkeley: University of California Press

Elliott, James R., and Mario Sims. 2001. "Ghettos and barrios: The impact of neighborhood poverty and race on job matching among blacks and Latinos." *Social Problems* 48 (3): 341-61.

Espinoza, Vicente. 1999. "Social networks among the urban poor: Inequality and integration in a Latin American city." Pp. 185-224 in *Networks in the Global Village*, ed. Barry Wellman. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Falcon, Luis M. 1995. "Social networks and employment for Latinos, blacks, and whites." *New England Journal of Public Policy* 11 (1): 17-28.

Falcon, Luis M., and Edwin Melendez. 2001. Racial and ethnic differences in job searching in urban centers. *In Urban inequality: Evidence from four cities*, ed. Alice O'Connor, Chris Tilly, and Lawrence Bobo. New York: Russell Sage Foundation

Feinberg, Matthew, Robb Willer, and Michael Schultz. "Gossip and ostracism promote cooperation in groups." *Psychological Science* 25.3 (2014): 656-664.

Fernandez, Roberto M., Emilio J. Castilla, and Shyon Baumann. 2000. "Social Capital at Work: Networks and Employment at a Phone Center," *American Journal of Sociology* 105: 1288-1356

Fischer, Claude. 1982. *To Dwell Among Friends: Personal networks in town and city*. University of Chicago Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1973 [1959].The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press.

Goffman, Irving. 1969. *Strategic Interaction*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.

Gomberg-Muñoz, Ruth. 2011. *Labor and Legality: An Ethnography of a Mexican Immigrant Network.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Gondal, Neha and Paul McLean. 2013. "Linking Tie-Meaning with Network Structure: Variable Connotations of Personal Lending in a Multiple-Network Ecology." *Poetics* 41: 122-150.

Gouldner, Alvin W. 1960. "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement." *American Sociological Review* 25:2, 161-178.

Granovetter, Mark. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78:6, 1360-78.

Granovetter, Mark. 1995 [1974]. *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers*. Second edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Granovetter, Mark. 1985. "Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness." *American journal of sociology* 91.3: 481-510.

Greif, Avner. “Reputation and Coalitions in Medieval Trade: Evidence on the Maghribi Traders.” *The Journal of Economic History* 49(4): 857-882.

Gutierrez, Catalina, Pierella Paci, and Marco Ranzani. 2008. *Making Work Pay in Nicaragua: Employment, Growth, and Poverty Reduction*. Washington DC: The World Bank.

Hanson, Susan and Geraldine Pratt. 1991. “Job Search and the Occupational Segregation of Women.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81:2.

Hashemi, Manata. "Waithood and Face: Morality and Mobility Among Lower-Class Youth in Iran." Qualitative Sociology 38, no. 3 (2015): 261-283.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Univ of California Press, 2012.

Holzer, Harry J. *What employers want: Job prospects for less-educated workers*. Russell Sage Foundation, 1996.

Huffman, Matt L. and Lisa Torres. 2002. “It’s Not Only ‘Who You Know’ That Matters: Gender, Personal Contacts, and Job Lead Quality.” *Gender & Society* 16:6, 793-813.

Instituto Nacional de Informacion de Desarrollo (INIDE). 2008. “León en cifras [León by the numbers].” Managua, Nicaragua.

International Labour Organization. ILOSTAT database: Nicaragua. Version: 20160714_12-30_20160725:0432. http://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/help_home/data_by_country/country-details?country=NIC&_adf.ctrl-state=cmrgk7xc9_4&_afrLoop=441560190386797#!. Accessed August 3, 2016.

Kollock, Peter. 1994. “The Emergence of Exchange Structures: An Experimental Study of Uncertainty, Commitment, and Trust.” *American Journal of Sociology* 100(2): 313-45.

Krippner, Greta R., and Anthony S. Alvarez. "Embeddedness and the intellectual projects of economic sociology." *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 219-240.

Lancaster, Roger N. 1992. *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lane, Carrie. 2011. *A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence, and the New World of White-Collar Unemployment*. Cornell University Press.

Lawler, Edward J., and Jeongkoo Yoon. 1998 "Network Structure and Emotion in Exchange Relations." *American Sociological Review* 871-894.

Yonghoon G Lee, Elena Obukhova, and Martin J. Kilduff. 2017. "Grappling with Agency: Tie Creation, Mobilization and Renewal." *Academy of Management Proceedings* Vol. 2016, No. 1.

Lin, Nan. 1999a. “Social Networks and Status Attainment.” *Annual Review of Sociology*. 25:467-87.

Lin, Nan. 1999b. “Building a Network Theory of Social Capital.” *Connections* 22:1, 28-51.

Lin, Nan. 2000. “Inequality in Social Capital.” *Contemporary Sociology* 29(6): 785-795.

Lin, Nan. 2002. *Social Capital: A theory of social structure and action*. Cambridge University Press.

Lomnitz, Larissa A. 2014 [1977]. *Networks and Marginality: Life in a Mexican Shantytown*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Lomnitz, Larissa and Ana Melnick. 1991. *Chile’s Middle Class: A Struggle for Survival in the Face of Neoliberalism*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Ma, Dali. 2015. "Social Belonging and Economic Action: Affection-Based Social Circles in the Creation of Private Entrepreneurship." *Social Forces* 94.1: 87-114.

Marin, Alexandra. 2012. “Don’t Mention It: Why People Don’t Share Job Information, When They Do, and Why It Matters.” *Social Networks* 34(2): 181-192.

Marsden, Peter V., and Karen E. Campbell. 2012. "Reflections on Conceptualizing and Measuring Tie Strength." *Social Forces* 91.1: 17-23.

McDonald, Steve and Glen H. Elder, Jr. 2006. “When Does Social Capital Matter? Non-Searching for Jobs Across the Life Course.” Social Forces 85:1, 521-549.

McLean, Paul D. 2007. *The art of the network: Strategic interaction and patronage in renaissance Florence.* Duke University Press.

Mears, Ashley. "Working for Free in the VIP: Relational Work and the Production of Consent." *American Sociological Review* 80.6 (2015): 1099-1122.

McDonald, Steve, Nan Lin, and Dan Ao. 2009. “Networks of Opportunity: Gender, Race, and Job Leads.” *Social Problems* 56:3, 385-402.

Molm, Linda. 2010. “The Structure of Reciprocity.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 73(2), 119-131.

Molm, Linda D., Nobuyuki Takahashi, and Gretchen Peterson. 2000. “Risk and Trust in Social Exchange: An Experimental Test of a Classical Proposition.” *American Journal of Sociology* 105:5, 1396-427.

Moss, Philip, and Chris Tilly. *Stories employers tell: Race, skill, and hiring in America*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2001.

Mouw, Ted. 2006. “Estimating the Causal Effect of Social Capital: A Review of Recent Research.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 32:79-102.

Newman, Katherine. 1999. *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*. New York: Vintage.

Peattie, Lisa Redfield. 1968. *The View from the Barrio*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Petersen, Trond, Ishak Saporta, and Marc-David Seidel. 2000. “Offering a Job: Meritocracy and Social Networks.” *American Journal of Sociology* 106 (3): 763-816.

Podolny, Joel. 2001. “Networks as the Pipes and Prisms of the Market,” American Journal of Sociology 107:33-60

Podolny, Joel M., and James N. Baron. 1997. ‘‘Resources and Relationships: Social Networks and Mobility in the Workplace,’’ *American Sociological Review* 62(5): 673–693.

Portes, Alejandro. 1998. “Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24:1-24.

Portes, Alejandro, Manuel Castells, and Lauren A. Benton, eds. 1989. *The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Portes, Alejandro and Richard Schauffler. 1993. “Competing Perspectives on the Latin American Informal Sector.” *Population and Development Review* 19:1, 33-60

Portes, Alejandro. 1998. “Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology.” Annual Review of Sociology 24:1-24..

Pugh, Allison. The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity. New York: Oxford University Press.

Roberts, Bryan R. 1995. The Making of Citizens: Cities of Peasants Revisited. New York: Halsted Press.

Rogers, Everett M. and D. Lawrence Kincaid. 1981. *Communication Networks: Toward a New Paradigm for Research*. New York: The Free Press.

Ruef, Martin. *The entrepreneurial group: Social identities, relations, and collective action*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

Sabel, C. F. 1993. "Studied trust: building new forms of cooperation in a volatile economy." *Human Relations* 46(9):1133-1170.

Sharone, Ofer. 2013. "Why Do Unemployed Americans Blame Themselves While Israelis Blame the System?." *Social Forces* 91 (4): 1429–1450.

Sharone, Ofer. 2014. "Social Capital Activation and Job Searching: Embedding the Use of Weak Ties in the American Institutional Context." *Work and Occupations*. (0): 0, 1-31.

Sharone, Ofer. *Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Shih, Joanna. 2002. “Yeah, I could hire this one, but I know it’s gonna be a problem”: How race, nativity, and gender affect employers’ perceptions of the manageability of job seekers. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25 (1): 99-119.

Simpson, Harrell, and Willer. 2013. “Hidden paths from morality to cooperation: Moral judgments promote trust and trustworthiness.” *Social Forces*.

Singelmann, Peter. 1972. “Exchange as symbolic interaction: Convergences between two theoretical perspectives.” *American Sociological Review* 37: 414-424.

Small, Mario L. 2009. *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Networks Inequality in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Sandra Susan. 2005. “Don’t put my name on it”: Social Capital Activation and Job-Finding assistance among the Black Urban Poor.” *American Journal of Sociology* 111(1): 1-57.

Smith, Sandra Susan. 2007. *Lone Pursuit: Distrust and Defensive Individualism among the Black Poor*. New York, NY: Russell Sage.

Smith, Sandra Susan. 2010. "A Test of Sincerity: How Black and Latino Service Workers Make Decisions about Making Referrals." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629.1: 30-52.

Smith, Sandra Susan and Kara Alexis Young. 2017. “Want, Need, Fit: The Cultural Logics of Job-Matching Assistance.” *Work and Occupations* Vol. 44(2) 171–209.

Small, Mario Luis. Villa Victoria: The transformation of social capital in a Boston barrio. University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Sprengers, Maarten, Frits Tazelaar, and Hendrik D. Flap. 1998. “Social Resources, Situational Constraints, and Re-Employment.” *Netherlands Journal of Sociology* 24: 98-116.

Stack, Carol B. 1974. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. Harper and Row.

Uzzi, Brian. 1997. "Social Structure and Competition in Interfirm Networks: The Paradox of Embeddedness." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 42:35-67.

Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. University of California Press.

Wellman, Barry, ed. 1999. *Networks in the Global Village*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Wellman, Barry and S.D. Berkowitz. 1988. *Social Structures: A Network Approach*. Cambridge University Press

World Bank. 2012. *World Development Report: Gender Equality and Development.* Washington, DC: World Bank.

World Bank. 2013. *World Development Report: Jobs*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Yakubovich, Valery. 2005. “Weak Ties, Information, and Influence: How Workers Find Jobs in a Local Russian Labor Market.” *American Sociological Review* 70(3): 408-421.

Zelizer, Viviana A. *Economic lives: How culture shapes the economy*. Princeton University Press, 2011.

Zelizer, Viviana A. "How I became a relational economic sociologist and what does that mean?." *Politics & Society* 40.2 (2012): 145-174.

Zelizer, Viviana A. *The Purchase of Intimacy*. Princeton University Press, 2005.

Appendix A: Methods and Data

Field setting

Nicaragua is an impoverished country, with at least 40 percent of the population living in poverty – earning less than one two dollars a day – and 9.5 percent living in extreme poverty – earning less than one dollar per day (Fideg 2014). It is the second-poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, after Haiti. In Nicaragua, underemployment is high and rising, even while formal employment is improving. This study focuses on an urban labor market because the supply and characteristics of jobs, and the supply and characteristics of workers, differ between urban and rural areas.

Nicaragua's urban labor market is characterized by vulnerability, informality, and underemployment: work is scare, wages are low, benefits are few, and the social safety net is weak. Only 5.3 percent of workers are unemployed in the official sense (ILOSTAT 2013). But other measures that capture workers' aspirations and frustrations offer a clearer picture of underemployment in urban Nicaragua. For example, 44 percent of the employed would like to work more hours than they do. When asked why they do not work more hours, 80 percent of workers cite a lack of available jobs or clients. Further, half of workers would like to change their job, and 40 percent of these unsatisfied workers sought other employment during the previous three months. Finally, 29 percent of the urban employed work more than 40 hours per week but make less than the minimum wage (ECH 2010). Only nine percent of workers are

covered by a collective bargaining agreement (ILOSTAT 2010). These figures illustrate the challenges of finding a decent job in a buyer's market for labor.

Although the Nicaraguan government styles itself as socialist, the economy is not centrally planned and property is not collectively owned. Eighty-four percent of urban workers in Nicaragua are employed by a private firm, and less than three percent work in the public sector (ECH 2010). For urban workers, the major sources of employment are retail or wholesale commerce (30 percent), manufacturing (16 percent), hotels and restaurants (8 percent), construction (5 percent), and private residences (5 percent). Social protection is weak: only 14.4 percent of workers contribute to an old age pension program, and only 23.7 percent of Nicaraguans of eligible age receive a pension (ILOSTAT 2010). There is no unemployment insurance.

Nicaragua is a sending country for emigrants, with more than 15 percent of its labor force living abroad (World Bank 2013, p. 21). While the study of migration is important, the vast majority of workers in the developing world do not emigrate. Thus, this study asks how residents of an urban area in a less-developed country obtain employment when migration is impossible or undesirable.

Like the rest of Latin America, Nicaragua possesses a robust informal economy. Although the informal labor market is difficult to measure accurately (Portes and Schauffler 1993), one way to estimate informality is to determine the proportion of workers employed by businesses without formal accounting procedures. By this measure, 64 percent of workers in urban Nicaragua are employed in the informal sector. Another way to measure informality is to add together the self-employed and the unpaid workers of family businesses. By this measure,

about 45 percent of workers in urban Nicaragua are employed in the informal economy (ECH 2010). Women in particular are drawn to informal work because its flexible schedule is more compatible with their domestic responsibilities (World Bank 2012, Zlolniski 2006). Indeed, female workers in Nicaragua are more likely than their male counterparts to be self-employed: Thirty-six percent of urban women are self-employed, compared with 24 percent of urban men (ECH 2010, World Bank 2012).

Nicaraguan women face formidable economic challenges. Female workers are more likely than male workers to be involuntarily under-employed – working less than 40 hours but wanting to work more (ECH 2010). Although Nicaragua experienced a social revolution in which women participated in high numbers, the Sandinista government did not advance gender equality in the way many had hoped, leaving the gendered division of household labor intact (Molyneux 1985). Further, Nicaraguan women face high rates of spousal abandonment (Kampwirth 2002). Thus, women bear most of the responsibility for their children's material well-being, despite legislation intended to equalize gender relations. Finally, like workers elsewhere the world, men and women in Nicaragua work in gendered occupations and industries (Pacheco 2013).

Education levels are fairly equal for men and women in León: Three-fourths of men and women have completed high school. Women play a significant role in León's labor market, but they also face challenges: 34 percent of adult women are employed on a permanent basis, compared with 41 percent of adult men, and nearly 40 percent of households in León are female-headed (INIDE 2008). As elsewhere in Latin America, most workers in León are employed in the service sector (INIDE 2008, World Bank 2012). León's migration statistics are similar to

country averages: About 15 percent of households in León have a member who emigrated outside Nicaragua, and 12 percent of households receive remittances (INIDE 2008). Residents of León face challenges to socioeconomic mobility: Nearly one-fifth of households are in extreme poverty, and another 30 percent are "moderately poor" (INIDE 2008, 51). Importantly, however, household-level poverty is not a foregone conclusion in this context. Given the overall level underdevelopment in Nicaragua, León actually has one of the lowest poverty rates among Nicaragua's 153 municipalities. Thus, León is a context where individuals' material well-being is directly affected by income, and where sources of income are scarce but not completely absent.

Another advantage is that León is not a capital city. The labor markets of capital cities have distinctive features, such as a higher proportion of government workers and better infrastructure. While I adhere to the view that all settings are ultimately unique (Small 2004; 2009b) and therefore there is no "typical" Latin American city, my study attempts to understand how workers obtain employment in an urban context where government employment is desirable but rare, residential mobility is relatively low, underemployment is perceived by the community as a serious problem, and work activity is not restricted by high levels of crime or insecurity. León, Nicaragua, is the ideal setting for the study because it possesses all these characteristics. In addition, using a smaller city as the study setting instead of a sprawling metropolis eliminates spatial mismatch – the inability of workers to find appropriate work within their geographical area – as a major factor for employment opportunities, so that social processes can be better understood.

Ethnographic evidence from urban Nicaragua suggests that social ties provide a variety of benefits for low-income workers. These ties include kin, fictive kin (godparents), friends, and political allies. However, the Sandinista Revolution of 1979 and the ensuing conflict eroded relationships between the working class and the middle class, as many middle class families fled the country (Lancaster 1992). Class tensions also militated against relationships between the upper and working classes.

Evidence from a pilot study conducted in summer 2013 indicates that the use of personal contacts to find employment is widespread. Respondents reported receiving job information from the contacts in their network as well as offering job information to others. Men generally received job information from men, while women received job information from other women. Further, personal contacts were important for obtaining unskilled employment, not just professional work. Findings suggest that the types of contacts used to find work vary considerably. Respondents found work through friends, cousins, in-laws, aunts and uncles, parents, colleagues, and teachers. The data further indicate that the presence of a contact in one's network does not automatically lead the job-seeker to mobilize that contact.

In sum, urban Nicaragua offers the opportunity to understand how workers find work in a context of high vulnerability and underemployment. The theoretical and substantive contributions of this study can help us understand processes underway in other places where low human capital, underemployment, and low wages are common.

Data and Methods

All data for this project were collected in León, Nicaragua, during four non-consecutive months of field research in 2014. The project was approved in advance by the Institutional Review Board at The Ohio State University, and all data were collected and stored in accordance with IRB rules for international research. No other institutions were involved in the data collection or analysis.

Sampling and recruitment

To recruit and interview respondents, I enlisted the help of eight local research assistants – seven women and one man. These assistants, whom I met while participating in another research project in 2013, were college-educated and experienced in data collection; I trained them in qualitative interviewing techniques during the first week of fieldwork. They were given the parameters for inclusion in the study; we sought men and women between the ages of 20 and 65, who were participating in the labor force – that is, who were either employed or looking for work. Moreover, I sought respondents who had held at least two jobs and therefore had a work history to relate.

During the first phase of data collection, respondents age 20-40 were recruited. The seven female research assistants recruited 49 of these respondents and interviewed 23 of them; I recruited one and interviewed 27. Although the ILO defines "young" workers as those age 15-29, I set the minimum age for recruitment at 20 because many Nicaraguans are still in high school until age 17 or 18, and I wanted to avoid capturing young workers who were unemployed because they had just finished secondary schooling. Also, workers under 20 may be preparing to matriculate into college. Although workers' educational trajectories are dynamic, and some of the respondents I interviewed expressed the hope that they would return to their studies in the future, none had attempted to do so. During the second phase of data collection, respondents age

41-65 were recruited. Six of the female research assistants and one male research assistant recruited 56 respondents, all of whom were interviewed by me.

Research assistants were instructed to recruit from outside their immediate family networks, but they were permitted to recruit from more distant connections. They recruited neighbors, former co-workers, former classmates, in-laws, and cousins; they also approached potential respondents who were unknown to them at workplaces such as factories, markets, and stores. This recruitment method does not yield a statistically representative sample, a fact that threatens the generalizability of the findings. However, there was no available sampling frame from which to draw a statistically representative sample. Alternatively, I could have selected neighborhoods at random, then selected homes at random within the neighborhoods. However, such a method would likely have yielded many households that did not contain a member eligible for the study. Moreover, my objective was to obtain rich qualitative data on work histories and personal relationships, and I believe that employing a network-based sampling technique led to the collection of high-quality interview data. Many potential respondents were skeptical of an American researcher, but being vouched for by local assistants helped me forge connections and gain respondents' trust. In addition, the response rate was very high – one respondent dropped out of the study before she could be interviewed because she left the country, and another left the study because he was sent to prison.

In total, 110 people were recruited and interviewed; three people were removed from the sample due to ineligibility – they either had post-secondary education or insufficient work experience. Two were removed from the sample because the poor quality of interview audio prevented transcription. Thus, the final sample is composed of 105 respondents – 54 men and 51

women, with an average age of 41. The average age was 39.6 for men and 42.1 for women (see Table 1).

At the time of the interview, 57 percent of respondents reported that they were employed, 45 reported that they were unemployed, and 4 percent were retired. Employment status is measured by the respondent's own self-report, rather than his activity per se. Therefore, some respondents who worked occasional odd jobs considered themselves unemployed because they lacked steady employment, while others who worked odd jobs reported themselves as employed because they considered day labor to be their occupation. Moreover, even respondents who refer to themselves as unemployed were engaged in some income-generating activity – babysitting, selling food, day labor, etc. Fifty-five percent of the women reported themselves as currently employed, compared with 62 percent of the men. Twenty-four percent of men and 39 percent of women described themselves as unemployed. Equal numbers of men and women were self-employed and retired.

The 19 employers were recruited from neighborhoods throughout León and were interviewed by one of the research assistants. The goal of this data collection was to triangulate the statements of workers and job-seekers to improve the validity of the findings. Interviews were brief, less than 30 minutes long. The businesses represented are tortilla seller, welder, taxi, contractor, bakery, automobile repair, flower shop, hotel, cyber café, restaurant, car wash, food stand, boutique, electronics store, and hardware store – providing a diverse sample of the types of businesses that employ low-wage workers in León. Eleven of the respondents are men and eight are women. Employers were asked about how they acquired or started their businesses, how many people they employ, how they recruit workers, what kinds of credentials they require,

and what they perceive to be the challenges of operating a business in León. They also were asked about positive and negative experiences with workers. These interview data were coded and analyzed alongside the data from workers, in order to provide a more complete picture of the low-wage labor market.

Data collection instrument

For data collection, a structured interview guide was used in order to ensure the completeness, and thus the comparability, of the data across respondents. Although qualitative, this study is not purely inductive per se; because the topics investigated here – job search and networks – have been studied extensively in other settings, this research was not intended to be exploratory. Rather, the goal was to obtain more in-depth information about network use than has heretofore been employed in the literature on job search. Thus, while the guide was structured, many of the questions themselves were open-ended, in order to allow respondents to provide the information most salient to them (see Weiss 1995). For example, one section of the interview guide asked about family relationships. Some questions were closed ended – "how many siblings do you have?" – and some were open-ended – "what is your relationship with your siblings like?"

The interview guide contained two main sections (see appendix A). Part one dealt with work history and part two addressed personal networks. Respondents were asked how many jobs they had held and to list each one. Then they were asked about each job, one by one: where they worked, how they found out about the job, and whether anyone else had helped them to get the job. Afterward, they were asked whether they had ever applied for a job directly and were turned down, and whether they had approached network members for assistance and were turned down.

They were also asked whether they had network members whom they did not want to approach for job-finding assistance. The objective here was to capture unsuccessful strategies in addition to successful ones. If they were unemployed at the time of the interview, they were asked about the search strategies they were using to find work.

In addition, all respondents were also asked about the times they had helped others find work: whether they had been approached for job-finding assistance, whom they had helped and whom they had refused, and the reasons why they chose to help or refuse. Thus, each respondent is potentially both a job-seeker and a contact. (Of course, younger workers are more likely to be a job-seeker than a contact, while older workers gave more job-finding assistance because their networks were larger and they had more work experience.) This is why these chapters address both the perspectives of job-seekers and those of contacts. In addition, two research assistants recruited and interviewed 17 employers in León who employed low-wage workers. These interviews were collected in order to triangulate the information provided by workers and to test whether the employer views and preferences observed in other low-wage settings were also applicable to this setting. These interviews were typically brief, lasting only about 20 minutes.

Finally, respondents were asked about their family backgrounds and personal networks. The objective of this line of questioning was to situate the respondent's job search strategies in the context of the web of relations in which she is embedded. Respondents were asked about grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, spouses, and children – whether they had these relations, how frequently they interacted, and what these interactions typically were like.

Transcription and translation

All interviews were conducted in Spanish. During and after the data collection phase, five of the audio files were transcribed by myself and the rest were transcribed by research assistants. All transcriptions are in Spanish; the passages of interview data used in the dissertation were translated by me. To verify the accuracy of my translations, I consulted with native Nicaraguans and other Latin Americans who are fluent in English as well as Spanish.

When translating data from Spanish to English, I occasionally eschew direct translation in order to improve readability and capture the speaker's meaning. For example, when making general statements respondents often used phrasing such as "*one* does not always know the intentions of others." When embedded in longer sentences, such statements become cumbersome, so in these instances I translated them into second person instead – "*you* do not always know the intentions of others" – in accordance with English conventions. When a word had multiple possible translations, I chose the translation based upon the context of the statement. For example, the word *vago* can be translated as "lazybones," "slacker," or "bum."

Although I have been fluent in Spanish for 15 years, some Nicaraguan slang was unfamiliar to me. When encountering words I did not know, I consulted my local research assistants. There was very little slang used, however, possibly because the respondents are, on average, older. Also, perhaps because the interview is itself an impression management situation, many respondents used careful grammar and refrained from cursing. In cases where respondents did use colloquial phrases, they often explained it to me, or my Nicaraguan transcriptionists would include a synonym in brackets alongside the unfamiliar word. Moreover, each piece of interview data was translated and analyzed within the context of the statements that surround it, rather than in isolation, thus facilitating translation and interpretation.

Coding and analysis

After transcription, the interview data were coded and organized using MaxQDA 12 qualitative analysis software. Participants were classified by gender and age. The basic coding scheme follows the interview guide, but other codes were added after data collection due to themes that arose in interviews. Analysis began during data collection – I wrote notes and analytical memos while in the field, and I reviewed interview audio and transcripts as I received them. My notes and memos informed the development of the coding scheme, and analysis continued during coding. When analyzing the data, my first task was to identify themes (Ryan and Bernard 2003). The interview questions provided a set of a priori themes for examination – for example, the techniques used by unemployed respondents to search for work. Another set of a priori themes were derived from the existing literature on job search and social capital – the importance of job-seeker reputation, for example, or the use of strong ties versus weak ones.

Other themes arose inductively. One key theme that arose early in the data collection process, and which I recognized due to constant repetition across interviews and within them, was *confianza* – trust, confidence, and intimacy. *Confianza* can be seen as an indigenous category in Latin America (Lomnitz 1977). Other themes that arose through repetition were the idealized characteristics of deserving job-seekers – "honest," "truly needs work," "likes to work" and the unsavory characteristics of undeserving job-seekers – "thief," "drunk," "irresponsible." Other induced themes arose from the proximity of statements to one another. For example, when asked about their search strategies, unemployed respondents would often segue from their search tactics to their views on why they were unsuccessful at applying to employers directly – for

example due to age discrimination by employers. Such unsolicited statements are understood to reflect themes that are meaningful to respondents.

While identifying themes, it is important to look for any contradictory cases – examples that run counter to an observed pattern. Thus, I looked for both similarities and differences (Ryan and Bernard 2003, Bernard et al 2016) across respondents' statements. For example, in the case of the theme of deserving and undeserving job-seekers described above, there was a great deal of consistency regarding the qualities that made job-seekers worthy or unworthy, but there was a sharp contrast when some men reported that, although they drank, they were still deserving of employment because their drinking did not affect their work performance. Thus, a new theme – protecting and repairing reputation – arose from statements that contrasted the common theme of "vice." Likewise, some respondents contradicted the theme of holding on to jobs by explaining how they managed to quit a job without losing face. In this way, more analytical leverage is gained by drawing upon patterns *and* the cases that run counter to them. This approach also led to the development of chapter four, on resistance to the reputation game.

Based upon these a priori and induced themes, I developed empirical arguments that constitute the core chapters of this dissertation. The themes formed the empirical body of each paper; I sorted the coded data into the corresponding sections, then whittled them until only the exemplar anecdotes remained. Sorting the data into the corresponding thematic categories required "lumping" together the experiences and perspectives of multiple respondents; when necessary, I also "split" the data within thematic categories.

One of the questions I wanted to answer with the data was how the labor market context shaped the job search in León. This required me to apply logical reasoning and to read between

the lines of respondents' statements, because respondents themselves were so accustomed to their structural context that they were largely unaware of its implications. I worked backwards, examining how respondents explained job search outcomes and how they actually searched for work. Then, still working backwards, I looked for driving factors. For example, I learned that reputation mattered not only because people found work through referrals, but also because workers who leave a job may want to return to it later. I also learned that giving a bad referral was not only risky because it jeopardized the contacts' current employment, but because it could also endanger his own reputation for trustworthiness, and therefore threaten his future employment or his ability to give referrals in the future. Ultimately, I built a conceptual model to explain how various features of the labor market shape the job search.

There are caveats, of course. The sample is, as discussed above, non-random, impeding the generalizability of the findings to the broader population. Although the interview guide was highly structured, it was not as systematic as a survey, meaning that some data may be missing. Moreover, respondents' efforts to manage their impression during the interview process may have led them to downplay or omit information about their employment history or networks. Because multiple coders were not used, inter-coder reliability could not be assessed, thus opening space for the critique that my coding and interpretation of the data are subjective and therefore unscientific. My interpretations and arguments are, indeed, mine. My claims to validity rest on the strength of the evidence deployed in these chapters, and I welcome the opportunity to debate and defend it.

Later, during a subsequent round of data analysis, transcripts were re-coded and a quantitative dataset of job searches was build using Microsoft Excel. The unit of analysis is

"search events" rather than jobs, because the data include not only jobs obtained but also jobs applied for and not obtained, as well as jobs offered but not accepted. Thus, the outcome of each search event was coded as "job" or "no job." Using search events rather than jobs allows for comparison of search outcomes among different search strategies. Given the nonprobability nature of the sample and the likelihood of missing data, however, such findings should be interpreted carefully.

Appendix B: Interview Guide and Coding Themes

Filter questions:

1. How old are you? [Must be 20-65]
2. How long have you lived in León? [Must be 5+ years]
3. Are you currently working for someone else, or have you previously worked for someone else? [If no, do not interview.]
4. What is the highest level of education you completed? [Must be high school or less.]
6. Do you have any technical training or advanced degrees? [If yes, do not interview.]
7. Do you have any health problems that prevent you from working or seeking work? [If yes, do not interview.]

Informed consent at this point

Current work & job history:

1. How many jobs would you say you held in your life?

2. Can you tell me about your first job?
    [Probe:]
    How did you find out about it?
    Did someone help you apply or recommend you to the employer? Who? [Probe further]
    [If contact:] How do you know the person who told you about the job? Was this person working for the same employer?
    [If contact:] At the time this person told you about the job, what was the relationship like?
        At the time, how often did you see this person?
        How close did you feel to this person? How well did you know them?
        Did you trust this person? (*confianza*)
        Were they doing you a favor? Did you feel you owed them?
    Did you know the employer personally beforehand? [If so, how did you meet?]
    At the time you found out about the job, were you looking for work?
    At the time, were you working for someone else? For yourself?
    At the time, did you know anyone else who had this type of job?
    At the time, were you married? In school?

How many people were you working with?
Why did you leave the job?
Do you know if anyone replaced you? [If yes:] How did they find out about the job?

3. What about your second job? [Probes from above; repeat for 3rd, 4th, 5th...*n* jobs]

4. Are you currently employed?
Probes:
What do you do? Who do you work for?
How long have you worked for this employer?
How many people are you working with?
What do you think of this job? How satisfied are you?
How did you find out about this job?
Did someone help you apply or recommend you to the employer? Who?
How do you know the person who told you about the job? Was this person working for the same employer? At the time, how often did you see this person?
[If contact:] At the time this person told you about the job, what was the relationship like?
How close did you feel to this person? How well did you know them?
Did you trust this person? (*confianza*)
Were they doing you a favor? Did you feel you owed them?
What was the relationship like after they told you about the job?
Did you know the employer personally beforehand? [If so, how did you meet?]
At the time you found out about this job, were you looking for work?
At the time, were you working for someone else? For yourself?
At the time, did you know anyone else who had this type of job?
To your knowledge, did you replace someone? Do you know why they left?
How many hours a week, on average, do you work? If you could work more hours, would you?

5. Can you tell me about a time when you were neither working nor looking for work?
Probe:

6. Can you tell me about a time you worked for yourself?
Probe:
[If yes:] What kind of activity are/were you doing?
How long have you been doing this?
How did you start doing this?
When you started, did you know others doing the same thing? Who were they?
Do you work in one location, or multiple locations? Where?
How many customers/clients do you have?
Where do most of your clients live?
How did you meet your clients? Are your clients mostly friends, family, neighbors, or none of these?

Do/did you see your clients in non-business-related contexts?
Have you ever heard about a job from a client?
[If yes:] Who was the client? What kind of job? [Probe]

7. Looking back over your work history, would you describe your employment experiences as mostly positive or mostly negative? Why?

8. Is there a minimum salary below which you would not accept a job? How much?

9. Are there jobs you would not take? Why?

Job information received

1. Can you think of a time, other than the jobs we've already discussed, when you have been offered a job when you were not looking for one?
Probes:
Who offered it to you? How did you know them? How often did you see them at the time?
Were you employed at the time? [If yes:] Was the offered job better, worse, or the same as your current one?
What was the job you were offered?
Did you take it? Why or why not?

2. Can you tell me about a time, other than the jobs we've already discussed, when someone told you about a job that you did not apply for?
Probe:
What kind of job was it?
Who told you? How do you meet this person?
At the time, how often did you see this person?
How close did you feel to this person? How well did you know them?
Did you trust this person? (*confianza*)
Why did you decide not to apply?
Did you want the job?
Were there circumstances that would have prevented you from taking the job?

3. Can you tell me about a time you wanted to ask someone about a job but hesitated?
Why did you hesitate?
Who was it?
In the end, did you ask or not? What was the outcome?

4. Can you describe a time when you asked someone to help you find work, and they did not help you?

5. Do you know anyone who has been especially helpful in helping other people find work?
Probe: Who is this person? What type of work do they do? How do you know them?

Job information given

1. Can you tell me about a time you helped someone else to obtain a job?
Who? What kind of job?
Did you give them information, offer a referral, or hire them yourself?
When did you tell them about it? Where were you at the time? Was anyone else there?

2. Can you tell me about a time when you wanted to tell someone about a job but hesitated?
Why did you hesitate?
Who was it?
In the end, did you ask or not? What was the outcome?

3. Can you tell me about a time when someone asked you to help them get a job and you refused?
Who was it? How did you know them?
What did they want you do to for them?
Why did you refuse?

4. Can you tell me about a time you applied for a job you did not get?
Probe:
a. What kind of job was it?
b. Who was the employer?
c. Did you know anyone who was working at the organization at the time?
d. How did you find out about the job?
e. How did you apply? [Probe for details]

Personal background and social network

1. Tell me about your childhood.
Probes:
Where were you born? Where did you grow up? [Why did you move to León?]
What was your father's occupation when you were growing up? What was/is his education level?
What was your mother's occupation? What is/was her education level?
Where were your parents born? Where were they raised?
Were you raised by your parents or someone else?
Did you live with any other relatives at any point during your childhood?
Do you have family in other cities, towns, or villages? Where?
What is/was your father's relationship like with his siblings and parents?

What is/was your mother's relationship like with her parents and siblings?

2. Can you tell me about your grandparents? Are they still alive? [Probe]

3. Can you tell me about your siblings? How many do you have, including step-sibling, half-siblings, and adopted siblings?
   What kinds of jobs do they have? Do any own a business? [Probe]
   How often to you see them in person? How often do you communicate? Do you communicate mostly over the telephone, in person, or social media?
   Have any of them ever helped you obtain a job? [Probe]
   Have any of them done an important favor for you? How long ago?

4. Can you tell me about your aunts and uncles? How many do you have?
   Probe:
   What kinds of jobs do they have? Do any own a business? [Probe]
   How often to you see them in person? How often do you communicate? Do you communicate mostly over the telephone, in person, or social media?
   Have any of them ever helped you obtain a job? [Probe]
   Have any of them done an important favor for you? How long ago?

5. Can you tell me about your cousins? (Including second-cousins)
   Probe:
   What kinds of jobs do they have? Do any own a business? [Probe]
   How often to you see them in person? How often do you communicate? Do you communicate mostly over the telephone, in person, or social media?
   Have any of them ever helped you obtain a job? [Probe]
   Have any of them done an important favor for you? How long ago?
   How would you describe your relationship with them?

6. Do you have any family members you have never met? Please explain.

7. Can you tell me about family members you used to spend time with but no longer do? Explain.

8. Going back to your childhood, can you tell me about the schools you attended?
   What were you like as a student? Are you still in contact with your classmates? Your teachers?

9. Tell me about this neighborhood.
   How long have you lived in this house? In your neighborhood?
   Do you belong to a church or religious organization currently? [If yes:] For how long?
   Did you go to a church growing up? Are you still in contact with people you met through the church?
   Do you belong to a community organization or neighborhood group currently?

Did you belong to a community organization or neighborhood group when you were younger? How long ago? Are you still in contact with people you met through the group?

10. Can you tell me about your coworkers? [Probe]

11. Tell me about your friends, other than the coworkers we just discussed.
    Probe:
    What kinds of jobs do they have? Do any own a business? [Probe]
    How often to you see them in person? How often do you communicate? Do you communicate mostly over the telephone, in person, or social media?
    Have any of them ever helped you obtain a job? [Probe]
    Have any of them done an important favor for you? How long ago?
    How did you meet them?
    Are they friends with one another?

12. Can you tell me about anyone who used to be close friends, but have lost contact?
    a. Why do you think you have fallen out of contact?

13. Do you have a partner or spouse?
    How long have you been together?
    How did you meet your spouse/partner?

14. [If yes] Does your spouse/partner work? (What do they do?)

15. Do you have children?
    a. [If yes:] How many? How old are they?

Thank you again for your time and assistance. Do you have any questions for me? Is there anything you would like to say that I have not asked about?

Initial coding scheme (subthemes in parentheses)

Gender (male, female)

Age (24 and under, 25-49, 50 and over)

I used these categories because Nicaraguans age 25-49 experienced the economic and political crises of the 1980; those 24 and under were born after the electoral defeat of the Sandinista government by Violeta Chamorro in 1990. And Nicaraguans 50 and older were old enough to participate in the revolution and civil war. Indeed, most of the older

men – and some of the women – I interviewed had served in the military, and many had lost family members during the conflict.

Education

All respondents have a high school degree or less; here I coded information about respondents' educational trajectories as well as their views on education – for example, their advice to their children and their future aspirations.

Many respondents had left school at early ages at the behest of parents who could not afford to feed and educate them, or because an unplanned pregnancy compelled them to seek a way to maintain their new family. Other left school because they were not interested in studies; instead they were drawn to the prospect of making money, even if wages for child workers were modest.

Migration

Here I coded respondents' discussions of migration experiences. It was common for respondents to have migrated to Costa Rica, sometimes more than once, for periods of several months to several years. Men typically worked in construction, and women worked in private homes as domestics or in hotels. Some respondents had family in the United States or elsewhere; one respondent had lived in the U.S. herself, but returned when her child became ill. Surprisingly, perhaps, very few respondents expressed a desire to migrate in the future.

Marital

Here I coded respondents' discussions of their marital status, their relations with their spouses, and their spouses' occupations.

Network size/structure (conflict, org involvement, housing, exchange/support)

Here were coded all mentions of network members – family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. I coded for the presence of conflict, for the respondents' participation in formal organizations, including churches, for the respondents' housing situation, and for instances of exchange or support among network members.

Overall, organizational involvement was very low. A few respondents attended church, but very few did so regularly. Only one respondent, who rented a room, lived alone. Respondents often received support from others, especially parents and siblings, in the form of childcare, job leads, housing, and small sums of money.

Labor market setting (vacancy chains, self-employment, tie formation/dissolution, Revolution, childhood experiences, training, types of jobs/businesses, working conditions, reputation, application process)

Here were coded all mentions of the broader labor market context, as well as personal experiences relevant for understanding this setting. I coded for times when respondents were self-employed, for how they formed new ties or dissolved existing ones, and for mentions of the Sandinista Revolution or military service, for how they learned work skills, for working conditions they experienced, and for how they applied for jobs.

Respondents, especially the oldest ones, described growing up in conditions of abject poverty. They grew up in numerous families, in which children were sent to live with extended family members when families grew too large. As children, respondents were expected to contribute financially when the parents were too poor. Many of the over-40 workers I interviewed grew up in the countryside, but they moved to León as children or adults. Some moved after the Revolution in 1979, when the new Sandinista government confiscated the haciendas they were living on. Many of the over-40 workers grew up working with their families in the cotton fields that surrounded León during the cotton boom of the 1970s. Sisters and brothers often worked side by side until they reached the age of 12 or 13, when they were diverted into gendered employment.

Many respondents, especially men, informally apprenticed as young boys for bakers, mechanics, tailors, and masons. At first, most were unpaid, though some were paid eventually for their work. When the young apprentice had learned his trade, he sought a different employer or struck out on his own. Women, too, learned their skills from family members.

Personal narrative (expertise/skill, employer interest, exploitation, moral speech)

Here I coded statements indicative of respondents' identities, especially their identities as workers. Some emphasized their abilities, and others emphasized their willingness to see the employment relations from their boss's point of view, while others complained of exploitation and discrimination.

Job lead only – no referral

Here were coded times when respondents offered (or received) information about a job opening but did not give a referral. This was far less common than referrals, but it occurred when the contact did not have any connection to the employer (i.e. she saw an ad in the paper or heard it from someone else) or when she did not want to put her own reputation at stake.

Relation: job-seeker and contact

Here I coded the nature of the tie between the job-seeker and the contact.

Relation: job-seeker and employer

Here I coded the relation between the job-seeker and the employer; in some cases, respondents had approached friends and family members directly, not for a referral but for a job.

Relation: contact and employer

Here were coded the relation between the contact and employer. Often, the contact was a current or former employee; in some cases, the contact was a family member or friend. Usually, the contact had influence with the employer, unless the job-seeker was applying for a job at a major employer such as the export-zone factory, and the contact merely provided a letter of reference.

Info holder (contact) views

Here were coded the responses that were given when participants were asked how they decide to give or withhold job leads or referrals.

Job-seeker views/strategy (active, passive, renouncing)

Here were coded the responses to the questions about how the respondent looked for work. "Active" refers to approaching employers directly, "passive" refers to receiving unsolicited job offers from others, and "renouncing" refers to statements about jobs respondents had quit or would refuse to accept. (Some respondents said they would not accept "bad" jobs like dealing drugs or prostitution.)

Outcome (no referral – not asking; no referral – no lead; referral – negative result; referral – positive result)

Here I coded the outcome of reported job referrals. (The outcome is not known for every referral mentioned, which is why I do not use this code as a 'dependent variable,' nor do I provide descriptive analyses for it.) I coded for instances when respondents said they decided not to approach contacts for job leads, for instances when job-seekers asked for a referral but did not receive it, for times when a referral was given but the outcome was negative (i.e. the worker acted in a way that reflected poorly on the contact, or the worker was unhappy with the match), and for times when a referral turned out well (i.e. the respondent reported that both the employer and worker were satisfied, or the worker remained with the employer for a long time).

Appendix C: Tables

Table 1. Description of study sample (N=105)

Gender	*#*	*%*
Male	54	0.51
Female	51	0.49
Age		
24 and under	12	0.11
25-34	26	0.25
35-49	35	0.33
50 and over	32	0.30
Employment		
Unemployed	27	0.26
Employed	62	0.58
Self employed	12	0.11
Retired	4	0.04

Table 2: Type of job search (N=956)

Search type	**# of searches**	**%**
Network-based search	670	70%
Direct search	277	29%
Unknown	9	1%
Total	*956*	*100%*

Table 3: Network structure types for network-based searches (N=670)

Network structure	**# of searches**	**% of network searches**	**% of all searches**
Triad	461	69%	49%
Dyad	162	24%	17%
Four-node	47	7%	5%
Total	*670*	*100%*	*71%*

Table 4: Respondent role in search (N =956)

Respondent role	**# of searches**	**% of searches**
Job-seeker	731	76%
Contact	204	21%
Employer	21	2%
Total	*956*	*99%*

Table 5: Type of job-finding assistance given or received (N=956)

Type of assistance	**#**	**%**
Referral	508	53%
No assistance	177	18%
Hiring	162	17%
Information only	84	9%
Letter of reference	16	2%
Unknown	9	1%
Total	*956*	*100%*

Table 6: Job contact's relationship to job-seeker in triadic or four-node searches (N=508)

Tie type – job-seeker/contact	**#**	**%**
Friend	116	23%
Neighbor	89	18%
Sibling**	41	8%
Parent	40	8%
Cousin	35	7%
Brother-in-law/Sister-in-law	17	3%
Acquaintance	17	3%
Former co-worker	16	3%
Aunt/Uncle	14	3%
Other*	94	19%
Unknown	29	6%
Total	*508*	*101%*

*A tie type is listed if it contained 10 or more searches.

**Genders are combined (siblings, parents), because each group contains a roughly equal number – for example, 21 searches were assisted by brothers and 20 searches were assisted by sisters.

Table 7: Employer's relationship to contact in triadic or four-node job searches (N=508)

Tie type: Contact/employer	**# of searches**	**% of searches**
Employer	280	55%
Friend	38	7%
Acquaintance	12	2%
Former employer	11	2%
Parent	11	2%
Other	65	13%
Unknown	91	18%
Total	*508*	*99%*

Table 8: Employer's relationship to job-seeker in dyadic job searches (N=162)

Tie type: Job seeker/employer	**#**	**%**
Neighbor*	47	29%
Friend	27	17%
Former employer	14	9%
Acquaintance	13	8%
Sibling	12	7%
Aunt/Uncle	11	7%
Cousin	11	7%
Other	27	17%
Total	*162*	*101%*

*"Neighbor" category includes former neighbors.

Table 9: Type of jobs applied for by men (N=531)

Common occupations sought by men	**#**	**%**
Skilled trade (Carpentry, electricity, masonry, welding, plumbing)	56	11%
Mechanic	40	8%
Construction	34	6%
Driver (bus, taxi, truck)	32	6%
Security guard	34	6%
Baker	25	5%
Public sector (university, government)	13	2%
Other	297	56%
Total	531	100%

Table 10: Type of jobs applied for by women (N=425)

Common occupations sought by women	**#**	**%**
Domestic work	97	23%
Food service	54	13%
Export-zone factory operator	37	9%
Laundry	23	5%
Child care/ elder care	24	6%
Public sector (university, government)	17	4%
Other	173	41%
Total	*425*	*101%*

Table 11: Job search outcomes (N=956)

Search outcome	**#**	**%**
Job – in León	660	69%
No job	204	21%
Job – outside León*	63	7%
No job – refused by seeker	8	1%
Unknown	21	2%
Total	*956*	*100%*

*Jobs outside León include Managua (24), other parts of Nicaragua (7), other countries in Central America (30), and the United States (2).

Table 12: Search strategy (N=956)

Type of search	**#**	**%**
Active	592	62%
Passive	305	32%
Unknown	59	6%
Total	*956*	*100%*