

6 Theories of International Migration and Immigration: A Preliminary Reconnaissance of Ideal Types

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NEITHER SCIENTIFIC THEORY nor ideas for empirical research develop out of thin air. Although the image of the solitary researcher working with only her or his imagination persists in the popular imagination, and even in some scholarly circles, research is a profoundly interactive and social process. Most research work invariably originates in a dialogue with the scholarly literature, which serves as the primary means of communication among active researchers. Ideas and hypotheses often arise in response to the published work of other scholars as well as from conversations with colleagues and students. Moreover, the influence of ideas from outside the world of research—from politics, popular thinking, and other fields—can be remarkably influential. These influences from both inside and outside the scholarly world shape the selection of important research questions as well as the methods used to study them.

The development of social science theory is also profoundly affected by the nature of empirical research, especially the constraints on the testing of hypotheses. Since most of the social sciences cannot rely on the classical experimental method, the challenge is to formulate research designs and to collect appropriate data that allow for the post hoc assessment of hypotheses. This is a Herculean task, for without control over all causal variables, it is difficult to rule out all alternative explanations. And since most patterns in the social world are probabilistic and partial, as well as contingent on time and place, the selection of a population or a sample of a population for study may have a critical impact on the nature of the research findings uncovered. In addition to questions of research design, measurement problems loom large in social science. Errors arising from imperfect or unreliable measurement of complex and multidimensional variables are often confounded with "true" empirical patterns. Thus, any assessment of social science knowledge must be devoted to evaluations

of research design, the quality of data, and measurement issues as well as the consistency of research findings.

In addition to the verification of hypotheses, social science also faces the challenge of the appropriate scope of theoretical formulations. Although some attempts have been made to posit universal theories that explain the similarities in human behavior and social institutions across all societies, most theoretical frameworks are "middle range," with a limited scope of application, and may be framed in fairly broad and abstract terms. Weak data, problematic empirical tests, and inconsistent research findings leave considerable room for novel interpretations. Given these conditions, there is no one standard path for the development and verification of social science theory.

In this essay, I review some common features of what might be considered "ideal types" of social science theory and illustrate them with references to the literature on international migration and immigration. The ideal types of theory considered here are: social science as ideology, social science as the accumulation of facts, social science as the clash of theories, and social science as the development of models. These types should not be seen as historical stages of social research, because all of them can coexist and indeed even overlap in the same theoretical formulation. An understanding of the elements of theory construction, accompanied by substantive knowledge and some inspired thinking, can sometimes lead to the greater integration of knowledge and to interpretative frameworks that stimulate cumulative empirical research.

SOCIAL SCIENCE AS IDEOLOGY

Social science arose in the nineteenth century as a branch of moral philosophy. There was scarcely any distance in the discourse between what society

was and what society ought to be. Over the decades, social science, including its component disciplines, became more institutionalized as "science" as it gained independence from traditional ideologies and self-interest. Nonetheless, the impact of ideology on social science has never disappeared. The Marxian model of linking scientific research to political goals was widely imitated by many groups with quite different political agendas. Some social reformers, eugenicists, and members of social movements saw the development of social science as subservient to their larger social goals.

The social science analyses contained in the forty-one volumes of the Immigration Commission of almost a century ago, popularly known as the Dillingham Report, are classic examples of this genre of research in the field of immigration studies (U.S. Immigration Commission, 1907–10). Conforming to the prevailing intellectual wisdom of the era, these reports showed, with considerable empirical detail, that the "new immigrants" (those coming from eastern and southern Europe) were inferior to the old immigrants (those from northern and western Europe) and less likely to assimilate. These conclusions have been shown to be based largely on a very selective interpretation (and frequent misinterpretation) of data (Handlin 1957; Jones 1992, 152–57). The intellectual climate of early-twentieth-century America generally accepted the social Darwinist ideas of the biological inferiority of nonwhite peoples, and most southern and eastern European immigrants were considered nonwhite (Gould 1996). Given the class, religious, and ethnocentric biases against new immigrants during that era, the influence of ideology on social science is not disguised.

A good share of immigration research continues to be affected, though much less overtly, by ideological pressures. This tendency is illustrated by the almost ubiquitous references to "immigration problems" in popular discussion and much academic writing on the subject. Many researchers begin their studies assuming that immigration causes problems for American society, such as employment dislocation and crowded inner cities and schools by new groups that resist assimilation into the dominant cultural values of the society. The presumption that immigrants cause social problems in the receiving society may lead researchers to conclude that observed temporal and spatial correlations represent causal relationships. There could, of course, be the opposite bias by scholars who assume that immigrants inevitably contribute

positively to diversity and other societal goals. Recognizing such biases in the field does not eliminate their influence but may help scholars to be more cautious in their interpretations.

Ideology will always be present in social science since social scientists are human beings whose ideas and motivations (conscious and unconscious) can influence their framing of research problems as well as their interpretations of empirical data. The primary check on the influence of ideology is the open character of science as a public forum where ideas, evidence, and interpretations are presented for other scientists to review and criticize. Over the long run, hypotheses that are confirmed by researchers of varied political and policy persuasions, using different data and methods, will gain ground over tentative findings that are not replicated by other scientific studies. History is not, however, a linear process, and our confidence in the long-run cumulative character of science does not preclude many decades of intellectual stagnation and even decay.

SOCIAL SCIENCE AS THE ACCUMULATION OF SOCIAL FACTS

There is a great social (and economic) need for reliable knowledge about the patterns and timing of immigration, the composition of immigrant populations, and the correlates of the geographic and social mobility of immigrants after their arrival. Much of contemporary social science on immigration is focused on the measurement of social facts such as: Where do immigrants settle? Do immigrants receive more governmental social services than they pay in taxes? What has been the trend in economic progress for immigrant groups across generations?

Answers to these questions provide useful information for social service agencies that wish to help immigrants, for businesses that seek to market goods and services to immigrants, and for those who simply want to record the epic lives of immigrants and their families. Social science helps to fill the void for these needs and many more with the collection of reliable data and the basic task of social description. However, as Alejandro Portes (this volume) points out, research findings do not always speak for themselves, nor do they inevitably accumulate to a theory—in the sense of the codification of causal relationships. The reporting of research findings often assumes a theoretical framework that renders the research findings inter-

pretable, but without testing the underlying hypothesis. For example, the reporting of the economic progress of immigrants over time is compatible with a number of theoretical perspectives, both at a societal level (America is a land of opportunity) and at the microlevel (selective emigration of unsuccessful immigrants), but the reporting of the pattern does not explain its occurrence.

Nonetheless, good social description is a valuable contribution of social science. Indeed, with the ubiquity of poor social description (due to nonrepresentative samples, poor measurement, inadequate allowance for random error, and nonintuitive summaries of data), reliable and accurate information is a precious commodity. The immense value of accurate reporting of social facts is illustrated by the economic rewards given for comparable results in other fields—for example, insightful journalism, expert consulting, and influential market research. But the objectives of social science extend beyond the accumulation of descriptive findings.

The goal of social science is explanation—the search for causes that shape societal, community-level, and individual-level variations in outcomes. An example reveals how unexpected findings can generate a new theoretical direction. Consider the question of why some immigrant groups are more successful than other groups or able to move up the economic ladder more quickly than other groups. Knowledge of these differences is the first step in the research process, but specifying the potential explanations and then designing research studies to test derivative hypotheses is the ultimate strategy of science.

A few years ago, there was some tentative evidence that some of the children of the post-1965 wave of immigrants were not engaged in the expected process of upward mobility but were drifting downward to the “underclass.” These ideas were first explored in an influential essay by Herbert Gans (1992a), then refined as the “segmented assimilation” hypothesis by Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993). The new hypothesis attempted to move beyond the standard model of intergenerational assimilation and social mobility with the novel interpretation that immigrant families who reinforced traditional values (thus discouraging cultural assimilation into the peer community) were better able to sponsor the socioeconomic mobility of their children. In the space of only a few short years, the segmented assimilation hypothesis has been remarkably influential and has inspired a variety of studies of the “second genera-

tion” of the post-1965 immigrants (see the analyses in Portes [1996b] and Oropesa and Landolt [1997a]). The development of this hypothesis and the current state of the literature are cogently presented in the chapter by Min Zhou (this volume).

The stream of literature on the second generation reveals the development of social science research on immigrants and their children in American society. There have always been studies reporting significant variations in socioeconomic assimilation across immigrant groups. These findings could be interpreted as mixed evidence for the standard assimilation hypothesis. Was the glass simply half full (assimilation will eventually happen) or half empty (assimilation theory is simply wrong)? Studies that report basic descriptions of trends and patterns have limited value to explain variations across populations. It requires a new hypothesis to suggest how empirical anomalies might be explained. If American society has changed, presenting fewer opportunities for upward mobility and exerting far greater pressures for socialization into oppositional subcultures, then the variations among second-generation advance might be explicable.

Theoretical advance also depends on progress in empirical research. The first step is to document the observed patterns of educational and socioeconomic attainment (Hirschman 1996). More difficult and challenging is the task of collecting data to test theoretical explanations for the variations in the educational and occupational mobility of the second generation. Such research will require data on the relative influence of race and ethnic origins, the socioeconomic status and networks of the families of origin, and the peer community of neighborhoods and schools. Although this model of research is a daunting task, the accumulation of knowledge rests on the development of models and collection of data that go beyond the reporting of social facts.

SOCIAL SCIENCE AS THE CLASH BETWEEN COMPETING THEORIES

Theories are the fundamental glue that holds together the knowledge base of science. Theories provide the rationale for the selection of research questions and for the interpretation of research findings. Within the field of international migration studies, there is a plethora of theories, perhaps many more theories than the empirical base would warrant.

Explanations of why people move across international boundaries typically derive from one of several versions of economic theory (Massey, this volume). There are also several structural theories of international migration that posit the importance of international capitalism, international relations, environmental conditions, and the history of prior movements. The study of the adaptation of immigrants has been historically framed as the study of assimilation, but there are many versions of this perspective, as well as a range of theories from the study of race and ethnic relations. The consequences of immigration have not been framed within one general theory but are generally tied to the specific topic of study—economics, politics, intergroup relations, or other aspects of cities or regions. The diversity of theories reflects the multiplicity of disciplines and subdisciplines that are engaged in writing and conducting research on the causes of immigration, the fate of immigrants in receiving societies, and the political, economic, and social impacts of immigration. Is it possible to bring conceptual order to the field? This was the challenge that inspired the conference that led to this volume.

The very richness of theoretical claims, statements, and perspectives makes for very exciting debates and discussions. But in some of these debates research communities may be speaking past each other rather than to each other. This problem is particularly acute when there is an overelaboration of theory unencumbered with empirical research. The considerable scholarly prestige associated with novelty in theoretical directions provides an incentive to develop new theories (or new twists on old theories) that appear to be an advance over the standard models. In many cases, these new theoretical wrinkles are not associated with conventional hypothesis-testing empirical analysis but with illustrative cases or stylized examples.

The other problem with too many vague and imprecise theories is the lack of clear direction for empirical research. A considerable share of empirical research is published as the reporting of social facts—few explicit links are made to hypotheses or theories. Since research findings are often compatible with more than one theory, the significance and meaning of research are usually made clear only when results are elaborated as part of the broader conceptual framework of how the world works. The results of descriptive research can be very valuable (as discussed in the prior section) as the raw materials used by scholars to develop the-

ory or raise questions about theoretical issues. Without such value-added efforts, however, it is difficult for research findings to accumulate into empirical generalizations or to lead to deeper understanding or insight into why things develop as they do.

The norm of theory-driven research is not an automatic process. It is most likely to occur when there is one dominant theory or when there are clear battle lines drawn between contending theories that have well-understood empirical predictions. Most empirical researchers tend to work within schools doing "normal science." Normal science involves refinements in the measurement of important concepts and partial tests of selected hypotheses from the larger theory. Findings that do not conform to the expectations of the broader theory are most likely to be interpreted as due to defects in the data or measurement, or perhaps the influence of unmeasured variables. The ideal model of empirical research as a "critical test" of a central hypothesis of a theory is possible, but unlikely. It typically takes repeated anomalies (nonconfirmation of key hypotheses from a theory) over many years before a theory is weakened (Kuhn 1970). Change in the hegemonic theory in a field is more likely to be the product of incremental support for a rival theory than of the wholesale abandonment of the old theory.

With the assumption that one of the most fundamental tasks of social science is to make explicit the theoretical underpinnings of research, the primary objective of this volume is to assess the state of social science theories of immigration. We asked the authors to reexamine the extant theories in the field and to evaluate their status—both in terms of organizing the research literature and as a guide for continued research. The results of this strategy, we believe, have clarified a number of issues and advanced the field.

In his chapter, Douglas Massey reviews several theories regarding the determinants of international migration and finds that they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, he has shown convincingly that it is possible to incorporate ideas from different perspectives into empirical research (Massey and Espinosa 1997). This is an important lesson since many researchers work entirely within one theoretical school, primarily for disciplinary or methodological reasons, and assume that adherence to one theory implies the rejection of other theories.

One of the major obstacles to the accumulation of research on the socioeconomic progress of im-

migrant and ethnic communities has been the presumed inadequacy of the assimilation perspective and the lack of clear alternatives. For many years this has been an area with lots of vague theorizing, on the one hand, and footloose research findings lacking a clear message, on the other hand. Richard Alba and Victor Nee reexamine the empirical support for assimilation theory, and the historical experiences of immigrants from Europe and their children, in particular. Their reassessment shows considerably more support for assimilation as the long-term master trend of immigrant groups in American society than is usually acknowledged in popular thought or academic writings. The thesis of assimilation draws additional support from several other essays in part II, but there are some dissenting views. The segmented assimilation thesis posits that there will be heterogeneity in the process of adaptation and upward mobility for the children of the post-1965 immigrants by national origin, residence, and social class. One of the most valuable contributions of these essays is that the empirical implications of the alternative (non-assimilation) theoretical perspectives are clearly framed. Perhaps there needs to be a better specification of the mechanisms of these contending perspectives, but there should be little doubt as to the major theoretical issues that will guide research on these questions in the coming years.

In the final section of this volume, part III, theoretical perspectives on the consequences of immigration on American society are explored. There is less concentration on the refinement of theoretical issues here, in part because of the wide range of dependent variables examined. How has the presence of immigrants influenced politics, the national economy, and intergroup relations? These are only some of the questions addressed in this section. The vastness of these issues and the diversity of disciplinary traditions involved in their study make it difficult to summarize the contending theoretical frameworks on these questions.

There is, however, one common theme that spans a broad variety of issues concerning the consequences of immigration. The thesis is that immigrants, especially a lot of immigrants, create problems of economic adjustment and social cohesion. There is some logic behind this thesis. The political and economic systems of complex industrial societies are always under strain. The labor market tries to adjust the supply of workers to the demand of jobs, and the influx of outside immigrants is widely assumed to have adverse consequences

on the employment prospects and wages of native workers. Governments strive to achieve consensus on national objectives and to provide necessary services within the scope of available fiscal resources. The arrival of immigrants who are not socialized to national norms, who have pressing needs for special services, and whose incomes are insufficient to pay their share of taxes may create significant new problems. If there are race and ethnic divisions and tensions, the addition of more diversity may compound social problems.

The chapters in part III show, however, that this popular thesis is an oversimplification of the complex causal influences of immigration on society. There is, at best, only mixed evidence in support of "immigrants cause problems" hypotheses. Political and economic systems are exceedingly complex, with myriad internal dynamics and contested preferences. Immigrants arrive with varied backgrounds and become incorporated into many different areas and institutions. Just drawing up a checklist of positive and negative impacts is not a straightforward task, let alone specifying causal mechanisms. The testing of whether the number of immigrants actually causes or exacerbates specific problems is an even more complex task. A common practice is to point to an association in time and space between the presence of immigrants and contentious politics, economic downturns, and interethnic violence. This approach can raise the question and suggest a hypothesis, but assertions of cause and effect are typically much less certain.

SOCIAL SCIENCE AS THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODELS

Social science theories, as discussed earlier, are usually framed in rather abstract terms, such as the direction of an expected change in a dependent variable (assimilation theory) or a global relationship (migration is caused primarily by economic motives). Theoretical ideas such as these are an indispensable resource for the development of scholarly communities. With an organizing principle or a sensitizing concept, it is possible to make empirical generalizations across studies and to design research that focuses on common questions or sets of questions.

Theories pitched at too abstract a level may, however, lead research in a circular rather than a cumulative direction. The problem is exacerbated

when a theory is framed in unidimensional terms—pointing to the importance of one major influence in isolation from all other causal factors. The result is often that most derivative hypotheses are phrased in simple bivariate relationships— x affects y . As research progresses, hypotheses are often refined to be contingent to the values of the causal variable or dependent on the value of a third variable. For example, x affects y , but only up to a certain point or below a certain level (ceiling or threshold impacts), or only in the presence or absence of a third value. The theories that handle these empirical patterns are usually refined in an ad hoc fashion, with explanations that draw on specific cases. Problems often arise in the application of the theory to different populations and in the development of empirical tests.

There is a sharp contrast between a hypothesis framed at the bivariate level and the standard empirical method of multivariate analysis. Is the appropriate empirical test of the bivariate relationship or of the net association after other covariates are “controlled”? Some covariates may simply be confounding variables, and logic may suggest that their influence should be eliminated before “true” causal hypotheses are considered. Other covariates may be intermediate variables that transmit the impact of the causal variable to the outcome. Treating intermediate variables as control variables could lead to mistaken interpretations.

The dilemma is how to move from abstract and unidimensional theories to theoretical models of complex social systems. Models imply more than the impact of one variable on another, but how is that relationship (and others) embedded into a broader system of relationships. The use of complex models is standard in most of the natural and biological sciences, from climatology to human biology. For example, the study of human movement requires understanding of the circulation system, muscles, the nervous system, and other parts of the body as well as their joint interrelationships. The development of models allows researchers to focus on a broad range of questions informed by a systematic framework that includes reciprocal influences. There have been some efforts to develop models of social systems, including the study of international migration, but most efforts have not been influential.

The framework for most classical social science models is “structural-functional” theory. As the name implies, social structures (or institutions) are examined in terms of the societal functions they

serve. For example, family structure provides an institutionalized means for the regulation of sexual behavior and for the nurturance and socialization of children. Political institutions exist to resolve disputes and to regulate the use of force in society. Because of some inherent limitations, structural-functionalism has been generally discredited as the principal means to advance sociological theory. First, there was the tendency to equate the particular form of a social structure with the optimal functioning of the broader social system. Moreover, structural-functional theories did not adequately address the question of social change. The claim that institutions change in response to the changing needs of society is very close to a tautology.

In spite of these problems with structural-functionalism, there are few competing alternatives to the logic that the patterns of institutional arrangements across societies are shaped, at least in part, by feedback mechanisms from human capacities, environmental conditions, and the stock of available knowledge. A variety of systematic pressures might arise from collective or individual needs that are likely to influence the forms of social organization and the metabolism of human societies. The task for the development of theoretical models of international migration is to include a broad variety of potential causal variables, including prior history and external conditions.

One of the few examples of the use of models in the migration literature is the classical economic equilibrating model that wages (and other inducements to labor mobility) will vary in response to labor surplus and scarcity. Low wages tend to encourage the out-mobility of labor, and high wages to attract migrants. This model is sometimes referred to as a “push-pull” perspective on migration that is often dismissed because it is too simplistic to be of any potential use for research. It is, of course, the social and economic conditions that give rise to labor surplus and labor scarcity that are the important causal forces, but a close examination of the social system and its mechanisms allows for the development of theory and its refinement. For example, Brinley Thomas (1973) provides a historical analysis of the development of the “Atlantic economy,” a model of long swings in capital accumulation, economic growth, and international migration between Great Britain and the United States.

In Thomas’s model, migration is not simply an outcome of economic forces, but a pattern that

ebbs and flows in magnitude, direction, and composition with other demographic, economic, and social processes. Furthermore, the model is empirically developed and explored in relationship to particular periods in history and world geography. The 35 million Europeans who migrated to the United States (Handlin 1973, 31) were responding to the pressures created by nineteenth-century demographic growth, the collapse of traditional peasant economies, and the opportunities in the New World. Although specific historical circumstances will always be different, the essential elements of the model could be used profitably to explore international migration in other times and places. Comparative and historical studies based on an elaborated theoretical model of long-distance allow for accumulation beyond the reach of isolated studies.

There is not, to our knowledge, a parallel theoretical model of immigrant adaptation or assimilation based on the systemic properties and functioning of modern societies and economies. When discovered, the model may appear as a tautology because it will highlight only the common features of ethnic change, not necessarily all the diversity in outcomes, timing, and process. To be useful, the model must identify the central causal mechanism that links the general functioning of society with the process of ethnic and immigrant change. This is the challenge for scholars in the field of international migration in particular, and for the social sciences more broadly.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Theories are essential for making sense of research findings—explaining what is going on. A strong theory can often compensate for poor data. With a well-developed theory of cultural diffusion, archaeologists can often use evidence from a few shards of pottery to postulate the major forms of social structure in ancient societies. Without a well-worked-out theory of social change, policymakers are at sea if they choose to intervene in a society. (Of course, knowledge, or even an awareness of the lack of knowledge, is not a prerequisite for policymaking.) For these reasons, the development of theory must be a high priority for scientific progress, including the several branches of international migration research.

Good theory often begins with empirical generalizations. Observation of systematic patterns or social regularities often leads to an assertion of cause and effect. Key steps include the identification of intervening mechanisms and the recognition of multiple influences. Although more difficult to develop, the ultimate objective is the formulation of a theoretical model that posits feedback mechanisms and the linkages between variables to maintain a system of relationships. Theory that develops in tandem with empirical research can contribute to the cumulative accretion of knowledge about, and explanation of, international migration (and many other topics) in the modern world.