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# Components of Context: Respecifying the Role of Context in Migration Research

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## Abstract

For a century, scholars have studied immigrant integration in a range of destinations. Yet, the precise role of context in shaping integration outcomes remains poorly understood. Drawing from an analysis of an original database of articles and books in migration studies, I argue that this knowledge gap may be due to two closely related tendencies in the scholarship. First, case selection has relied on criteria such as the immigrant population's size and growth rate that are not clearly connected to integration outcomes. Second, most scholars have studied either heavily urban contexts (with large immigrant populations) or very rural contexts (where the immigrant population is growing rapidly), while much less attention has been given to destinations in-between. To improve the understandings of the role of context in immigrant integration, migration scholars should endeavor to move past population criteria when selecting study sites and to study the full range of contexts where immigrants are settling. To contribute to these efforts, I propose a framework that does not rely on population or newness as criteria for case selection and that focuses, instead, on the components of context that existing research has shown matters for intergenerational mobility. I also introduce a typology of contexts based on possible combinations of four of these components and offer some initial hypotheses of how these context types might affect immigrant integration. The arguments presented here recenter the role of local context in migration studies and contribute to debates about where and how scholars should study context moving forward.

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## Introduction

In a 1926 introduction to *Urban Community*, Robert E. Park pleaded for more research on the connection between local "communities" and immigrant integration. The problem of assimilating adult immigrants into urban life, he wrote, was an issue that scholars had only in "recent years begun to consider with any real sense of importance" (Park 1926, 7). Much progress on this research agenda has been made since Park was writing. Nearly a century on, migration scholars across the social sciences have studied immigrant life in countless places and developed frameworks (Portes and Rumbaut 2014) that have furthered understandings of the role that contexts of reception play in shaping immigrant life chances. Still, much work remains to be done. An influential review of studies of immigrant integration commissioned by the National Academies in the United States highlighted the need for more work in this area: "the experience of integration is, in reality, an inherently local one… the current research-based understanding of the local context of immigrant reception is regrettably incomplete and often superficial" (Waters and Pineau 2015, 208).

Why are understandings of the impacts of local context on immigrant life still so limited? In this article, I argue that a part of the problem is that migration scholars tend to explore only some types of contexts and, thus, do not analytically leverage the full variation in contextual features. I rely on an analysis of an original database of integration studies published in major migration journals and books over the last decade (2008–2018) to show two related tendencies. On the one hand, there is a tendency within this scholarship to study immigrant life in a limited set of places: the world's major metropolis (i.e., New York, Los Angeles, and London) and, more recently, rural destinations where immigrants have only recently arrived.[1] When

[1] By city, an incomplete list of notable works in the comparative tradition includes Amsterdam (Crul and Mollenkopf 2012; Foner et al. 2014), Boston (Bloemraad 2006; Suárez-Orozco 2001), London (Berrol 1994; Foner et al. 2014), Los Angeles (Crul and Mollenkopf 2012; Halle 2003; Lee and Bean 2010; Logan, Zhang, and Alba 2002; Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger 2018a; Min 1996; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Waldinger 2001), Miami (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Waldinger 2001), New York (Castañeda 2018; Crul and Mollenkopf 2012; Foner 2005; Foner et al. 2014; Halle and Beveridge 2003; Logan et al. 2002; Luthra et al. 2018a; Massey and Sánchez 2010; Min 1996), Paris (Castañeda 2018; Crul and Mollenkopf 2012; Lamont 2000), and San Francisco (de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013; Lee and Bean 2010; Suárez-Orozco 2001; Waldinger 2001). For rural areas, see Jiménez (2010), Marrow (2011), Massey (2008), and Zúñiga and Hernández-León (2005).

immigration was concentrated in a few urban places at the turn of the twentiethy century, the geographic focus on major cities made more empirical sense. But, today's immigrants have settled in a whole range of places in between major cities and rural towns. A recent focus on new destinations in the migration literature has helped expand the geographical coverage of migration studies away from just major cities. However, the new destination literature's focus on mainly rural places has only offered a partial correction. Ultimately, truncating case selection to these two extremes limits contextual variation and, thus, scholarship's ability to explain how these places' differing characteristics might impact immigrant integration.

On the other hand, the tendency to study either major cities or rural places is likely due to migration studies' lack of an explicit theoretical framework defining which components of context most matter. In the absence of consistent contextual criteria, case selection is often justified by the immigrant population's size or newness, as measured by growth rates—hence, the selection of study sites at urban and rural extremes. Population size or growth rates, however, have two problems as criteria for case selection. First, neither criterion has a clear connection to life outcomes (Brenner and Schmid 2014; Castells 1977; Jacobs 1963; Wirth 1938). Furthermore, it is notoriously difficult to define what constitutes meaningful variation on the basis of population size or growth alone (Angelo 2017; Brenner and Schmid 2014, 2015; Gans 2009). Both of these shortcomings make population/growth rate unsuitable criteria to guide case selection.

To improve understandings of the role of context on immigrant integration, migration scholars should endeavor to move past population criteria when selecting research sites and to study the full range of contexts where immigrants are settling. The arguments in this article proceed in four sections and work to recenter the role of local context in migration studies and to contribute to debates about where and how scholars should study context moving forward. The section following this introduction, presents an original analysis of 524 texts published either as articles in major journals or as highly cited books to explore what kind of contexts have been recently studied in the literature on immigrant integration. As I show, there is a clear tendency to repeatedly study a few, large, heterogeneous cities and a smaller body of work on small, rural areas, which are seldom studied more than once. This analysis provides evidence that population criteria are influencing the selection of research sites in migration studies. This pattern impedes a more nuanced understanding of the role of context by leaving out settlement areas in-between—cities and towns with moderate population size, levels of diversity, economic output, etc.—and by not considering the range of places in which components of context co-vary.

In the third section, I suggest how we might address the problem of theoretical under-specification and limited contextual variation by building on an influential contextual argument in migration studies—namely, the "context of integration" school — and by adding contextual elements that urban studies has highlighted as consequential (Chetty and Hendren 2018b, 2018a; Chetty et al. 2014; Galster

2012; Sharkey and Faber 2014). I propose a concrete focus on components of context that, according to existing social science research described in this section, are mostly likely to matter for immigrant integration and are also measurable and observable.

The third section also introduces a typology of contexts based on possible combinations of four of these components, enabling us to systematize cross-study comparisons and providing an analytical grid to study what contextual factors may (or may not) shape immigrant life trajectories. This combinatorial typology suggests a series of hypotheses about the types of contexts of integration that should be evaluated by future work: (a) that similarly urban and large or rural and small places might share some contextual features but systematically differ on others; (b) that some combinations of contextual components are empirically more plausible; and (c) that some combinations of contexts have largely been overlooked in migration studies. Furthermore, it identifies certain components of context, such as the physical environment, in need of additional study. I close with a reflection on the implications of this discussion for future research design. A short final section concludes the article.

## The Study of Contexts of Integration, Past, and Present

### *The Genesis of a Focus on Big Cities and New Destinations*

Migration scholars have long drawn their conclusions from the careful study of immigrant life in specific places. This tradition is well established in the body of work examining the impact of different settlement countries on immigrant life (Alba and Foner 2015; Bloemraad 2013; FitzGerald 2012; Martiniello 2013), but sub-national examinations have also played a crucial role in development of this scholarship. Early twentieth-century studies in Chicago, for example, have been particularly influential in the United States (Alba and Nee 2003; Alba, Reitz, and Simon 2012; Duneier 2016). Wirth's *The Ghetto* (1928), Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (1929), and Thrasher's *The Gang* (1936) are but a few of the meticulously researched ethnographies from this period. Similar studies, with increasing degrees of argumentative complexity and methodological sophistication, were eventually conducted in a number of other cities, mostly in the northeastern United States, including Boston (Gans 1962; Whyte 1981) and New York (Glazer and Moynihan 1963). In the 1990s, the horizon further expanded to include Los Angeles (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996) and Miami (Portes and Stepick 1993), supplementing the work that continued in Chicago, Boston, and New York (Bloemraad 2006; De Genova 2005; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Kasinitz, Mollenkopf and Waters 2004; Smith 2005; Waldinger 2001). Many of these cities have been studied repeatedly and compared with other major cities in the United States or abroad (Bloemraad 2013; Crul and Mollenkopf 2012; FitzGerald 2012; Martiniello 2013).

A similar tradition of work exists in major European cities, including London (Vertovec 2007; Robinson 2010), Paris (Weil 1995, 2008; Noiriel 2005;

Castañeda 2018) and Amsterdam (Foner et al. 2014). Taken together, this collective work has done much to teach us about immigrant life in the major cities, particularly in the Global North.

These studies' focus on a small number of large cities made sense historically, since these cities were the places where immigrants were concentrated at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond. According to estimates by Massey (2008), from 1901 to 1930, 36 percent of all foreign-born residents in the United States lived in just five cities (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and Miami), a number that rose to 48 percent from 1971 to 1993. More recently, however, immigrants have diversified their places of settlement and have now reached cities and towns that had not previously experienced any sizeable immigration (Massey 2008; Waters and Jiménez 2005; Winders 2014). Accordingly, geographic concentration has diminished significantly. By 2010, a mere 13 percent of immigrants lived in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago combined (Hall 2013), a process of spatial dispersion with parallels in European countries (Winders 2014). An additional development is that some of this dispersion has occurred in rural areas and small municipalities (Marrow 2011; Waters and Jiménez 2005; Winders 2014; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005). The various challenges and opportunities that immigrants have experienced upon arrival to these non-traditional places has been thoroughly documented in a growing scholarship on "new destinations" in the United States (Marrow 2011; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005) and, more recently, in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Winders 2014). This literature has given us a better appreciation of how integration processes are likely to play out among people who arrive in places that are radically different from the cosmopolitan megacities that migration scholars were accustomed to studying. However, what is the state of the current literature? What kinds of places are scholars currently studying?

## A Quantitative Assessment of the Current Geographic Focus

To understand patterns in the distribution of study sites, I created a database of subnational integration studies published over 10 years (2008–2018) in *Ethnic and Racial Studies (ERS), International Migration Review (IMR)*, and *The Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies (JEMS)*, as well as highly cited books.[2] I included all studies of immigrant integration in specific locales in these texts, whether or not they focused on context effects.

Creation of the database occurred over various stages. First, two research assistants and I created a list of articles that met four criteria: (a) They were published from 2008 to 2018 in *ERS*, *IMR*, or *JEMS*; (b) they studied immigrant integration,

[2] A full list of the articles, books, and book chapters is available on request. Details as to how these texts were coded are presented in the Online Appendix. Highly cited books are ones which had received more than 300 citations on Google Scholar, as of August 2019.

broadly construed, and contained the words "integration," "incorporation," or "assimilation" and its variants anywhere in the text, except for the citations; (c) they were conducted at the subnational level; and (d) they were not theoretical pieces. We used Alba and Foner's (2015, 5) definition of integration when evaluating whether a study was about immigrant integration: "Full integration implies parity of life chances with members of the native majority group and being recognized as a legitimate part of the national community."[3] To this list of articles, we added books, using Google Scholar citation counts via Harzing's "Publish or Perish" (PoP) citation scraper and aggregator, which has been used productively in previous bibliometric analyses (Adler and Harzing 2009; Harzing and van der Wal 2008; Jacobs 2016; Sirkeci, Cohen, and Přívara 2017; van Raan 2010).[4]

Once the list of books and articles was compiled, we coded the place and scale of study for each work. For the most part, this process was straightforward. However, as has been observed by other scholars (Bloemraad 2013; FitzGerald 2012; Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009), conclusions in an urban site were, on occasion, extrapolated to an entire state, metropolitan area, region, or even country, or different spatial units were used interchangeably within the same study (e.g., Los Angeles County, the city of Los Angeles, Los Angeles Metropolitan Area, Southern California). In these instances, closer attention was paid to the actual site where data were collected, and we coded that scale accordingly. In total, 446 articles and 78 books and book chapters were coded. All in all, the database contains 1,053 locales studied in this literature. The majority of these studies (74.0 percent) concerned settlements, meaning villages, towns, cities, or metropolitan areas. The rest studied regions, neighborhoods, or organizations. This breakdown is described in Table 1.

[3] To diminish the possibility that we were being too generous with our definition of an integration study, we also coded a dummy that indicated whether the words "integration," "incorporation," or "assimilation" and its variants were contained in the text. In this article, I report only the figures from texts that contained these words and were, in the best judgement of my research team, studies of integration.

[4] Systematically creating a list of reputable books in academic subfields is not an easy proposition, as demonstrated by authors that have attempted to do so using surveys, proprietary market data, or citation counts (Gans 1997; Longhofer, Golden, and Baiocchi 2010; Sirkeci, Cohen, and Přívara 2017). There is debate about the merits of using Google Scholar in bibliometric analysis, especially relative to other citation aggregators like Web of Science. However, there seems to be agreement that more commonly used bibliometric databases have gaps that are relevant to this project, especially concerning their coverage of social science and humanities texts (Adler and Harzing 2009; Harzing and van der Wal 2008; Jacobs 2016). Most importantly for this analysis, these gaps are quite large for published books. In testing Web of Science's usefulness for the creation of our database, I was surprised to find that Alba and Nee's *Remaking the American Mainstream* (2003) had zero citations in August 2019, confirming that Web of Science was not the appropriate tool for generating the list of books for this project.

**Table 1.** Study Scale.

| Scale | *N* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Settlement | 779 | 74.0 |
| Region | 120 | 11.4 |
| Organization | 104 | 9.9 |
| Neighborhood | 50 | 4.7 |
| Total | 1053 | 100.0 |

This database has a few limitations. First, for practical reasons, it is limited to a small number of influential English language journals. Thus, the analysis that follows makes no claims of representativity for all journals and certainly not for the literature in non-English languages. Second, a feature of citation analysis is that it underrepresents recently published texts, since it takes time to accumulate citations (Harzing, Alakangas, and Adams 2014; Jacobs 2016). Thus, the data on books tends not to include recent publications. However, achieving representativity was never the goal of this analysis, which, instead, intends to study the critical case (Flyvbjerg 2006) of influential journal articles and books. The underlying logic here is that if there is a tendency to focus on a certain geography in this corpus, this tendency is a problem in itself (since these texts are influential publications) and that trends emerging here will have an important influence on migration studies as a whole.

*Results and Conclusions: Disproportionate Emphasis on Cases at the Extremes.* The analysis of the literature described above confirms what other scholars have previously suggested: studies of immigrants have focused on a few places in the world (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009; Martiniello 2013). London, Los Angeles, and Amsterdam emerge as the most popular sites of study. This calculation, presented in Table 2, aggregates neighborhoods and organizations within the city in which they are located and also includes studies conducted in towns, villages, and cities. Regions are excluded from this analysis, given the smaller number of observations at this scale.

Furthermore, in the data, very few places beyond this small group were studied repeatedly. Only 110 (27.1 percent) settlements[5] were studied more than once, and only 66 were studied more than two times. Since a single text often studies more than one site, we also offer Table 3, which shows how many texts included the most frequently studied sites. One hundred and thirty-four out of 524 texts (25.6 percent) included London, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, New York City or Madrid in their analysis. Including Rotterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Stockholm and Toronto increases this

[5] This number also includes studies conducted within neighborhoods and organizations in these settlements (e.g., the sum of studies conducted in all of Los Angeles and neighborhoods and organizations in Los Angeles).

**Table 2.** Ranked Order of 20 Most Studied Settlements.

| | Site | *N* |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | London | 46 |
| 2 | Los Angeles | 35 |
| 3 | Amsterdam | 27 |
| 4 | New York City | 25 |
| 5 | Madrid | 20 |
| 6 | Rotterdam | 17 |
| 7 | Barcelona | 16 |
| 7 | Berlin | 16 |
| 7 | Stockholm | 16 |
| 7 | Toronto | 16 |
| 11 | Chicago | 11 |
| 12 | Paris | 10 |
| 12 | The Hague | 10 |
| 12 | Vienna | 10 |
| 15 | Boston | 9 |
| 15 | Oslo | 9 |
| 15 | San Francisco | 9 |
| 15 | Vancouver | 9 |
| 19 | Birmingham | 8 |
| 19 | Lisbon | 8 |
| 19 | Melbourne | 8 |
| 19 | Miami | 8 |
| 19 | Milan | 8 |
| 19 | San Diego | 8 |

percentage to 33.4 percent. Almost half (46.2 percent) of texts included at least one of the 20 major cities listed in Table 1.

Despite the continued focus in the literature reviewed on a small number of populous cities, there were also a number of studies conducted in less populous places, although fewer of these places were studied more than once. 27.3 percent of research sites looked at integration in places with populations smaller than 500,000, places like Garden City in the United States and Finnmark County in Norway. Since population thresholds are always arbitrary to a degree, Figure 1 plots the frequency of site populations

**Table 3.** Percentage of Texts that Include the Most Studied Cities.

| | *N* | % |
|---|---|---|
| At least one of five most researched | 134 | 25.6 |
| At least one of 10 most researched | 175 | 33.4 |
| At least one of 15 most researched | 196 | 37.4 |
| At least one of 20 most researched | 242 | 46.2 |

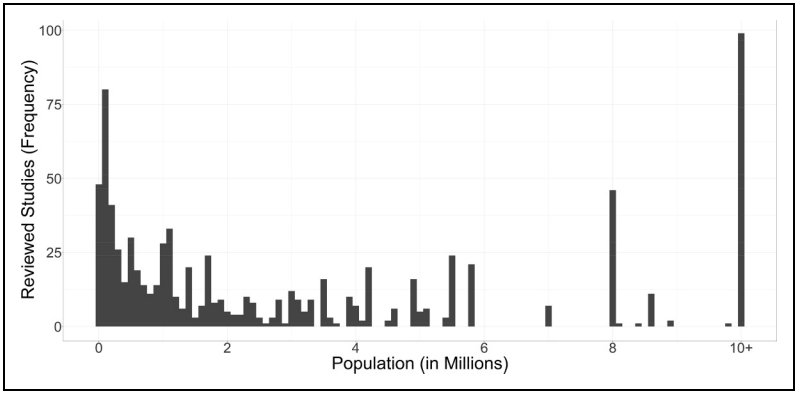


**Figure 1.** Settlements Studied by Population.

along a wider swath of the distribution. To make the analysis more granular, observations are binned together in 100,000 people intervals. Observations above 10 million are binned together to account for the distribution's long tail end. Figure 1 provides the clearest representation of the bimodal nature (unpopulous vs. populous) of site selection in integration studies, while Figures 2 to 5 contrast this distribution against the distribution of foreign-born people in settlements in the United States, England, and Germany. Observations in these figures are binned in 250,000 people intervals. These figures allow us to see if the focus on either very small or very big settlements in the reviewed literature is simply following the distribution of the kinds of places where immigrants actually live. As these figures show, at least in these three nations, the current distribution of studies does not match the geographic distribution of immigrant settlement, as many immigrants live in small and mid-sized towns with 250,000 to 3 million inhabitants. In short, most scholarship reviewed studied the two extremes of the urban/rural spectrum, with the urban extreme receiving the most attention.

## *Problems with Selecting Cases on the Basis of Population Size*

*Limited Contextual Variation.* A problem with the scholarship's focus on either very large or very small settlements is that it risks overlooking important contextual features present only in big cities or only in small settlements, but not those in-between. More precisely, the big cities studied most frequently tend to be well-resourced, diverse places, with established ethnic niches and progressive politics (Foner 2007; Gans 2009; Lee and Bean 2010; Lichter and Brown 2011; Lichter and Ziliak 2017; Vertovec 2007). The rural settlements studied, on the other hand, very often show the opposite qualities: little diversity, no ethnic niches, fewer resources, and conservative politics (Gans 2009; Lichter and Brown 2011; Lichter

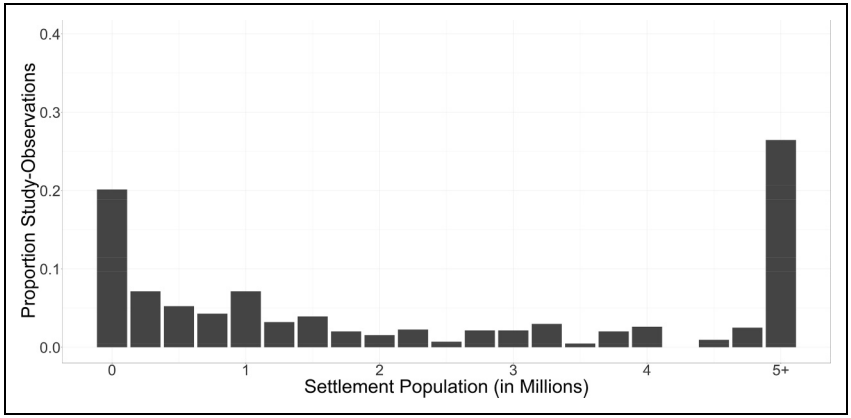


**Figure 2.** Reviewed Studies Proportion.
*Source:* Population data drawn from United Nations (2018) and respective national censuses. For a more detailed description of how this data was compiled, see the online appendix.

and Ziliak 2017; Marrow 2011). Furthermore, there is a risk of overlooking the effects of features that are shared by both very large and very small places. An example of a unique feature that could be missed would be public school quality which, in the United States, has been found to be of the lowest quality in both major urban centers and rural areas (Burdick-Will and Logan 2017). However, what about the places in-between? What combinations of contextual features do they exhibit, and how do these combinations conjointly affect the process of immigrant integration within such sites? These places are missed when the range of contextual cases is circumscribed to very large and very small settlements.

*Theoretical Under-Specification in Population Criteria.* Another issue this pattern suggests is that scholars are defaulting to population criteria as the theoretical basis for case selection, using either the immigrant population's total size or, alternatively, growth rate to justify research on a study site. The former is the modus operandi of traditional studies of immigrant life in major cities. Prominent examples of this kind of justification can be found in Crul and Mollenkopf (2012), Kasinitz et al. (2008), and Waldinger (2001).[6] The latter, the use of growth rates, is associated with the study of new destinations, places that have only recently experienced high rates of immigration (Singer 2004; Winders 2014). Examples of this larger tendency in

[6] An incomplete list of additional examples in the Global North are Foner et al. (2014), Lamont (2000), Maliepaard and Alba (2016), McMahon (2016), Nowicka and Krzyżowski (2017), Portes and Rumbaut (2001), and Scholten et al. (2018).

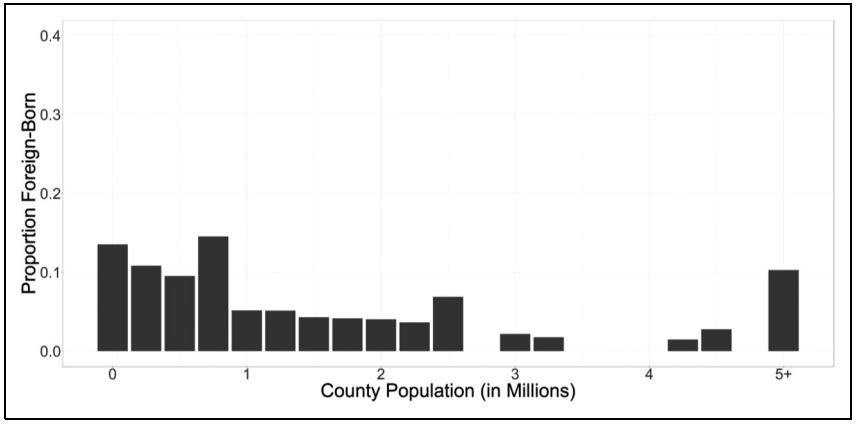


**Figure 3.** Foreign-Born Proportion in US Counties.
*Source:* US county data is drawn from the American Community Survey 5-year estimates (2015–2019).

migration studies can be found in Crowley, Lichter, and Turner (2015); Hall (2013), and Massey (2008).[7] Using population as the principle guide for case selection, however, makes it difficult to study context in a more systematic way for two reasons. First, as scholars have argued for generations (Brenner and Schmid 2014; Castells 1977; Jacobs 1963; Wirth 1938), population size or growth does not have a clear relationship to life outcomes. It is unclear, for example, if living in places with many or few people offers better life chances for individuals (Brenner and Schmid 2014; Castells 1977; Jacobs 1963; Wirth 1938). Similarly, increases in the immigration rate may or may not be connected to integration outcomes in any systematic way, as the causal relationship between an immigrant population's newness and its members' life chances remains unclear.

Second, it is hard to define what constitutes meaningful variation on the basis of population size or growth alone. Choosing "comparable cities" on the basis of population size has long been considered problematic because population thresholds are arbitrary and empirically inconsistent across the world (e.g. a city deemed large in Europe is often considered a "small city" by US standards; Castells 1977; Wirth 1938; for a full review of this argument, see Brenner and Schmid 2014). Loose definitions of what constitutes "the big city" or "a small town" mirror folk understandings of the urban and rural condition, which are theoretically ambiguous (Angelo 2017; Brenner and Schmid 2014,

[7] An incomplete list of additional examples in the Global North are Azzolini, Schnell, and Palmer (2012), Fenelon (2017); Silver (2015), Strang, Baillot, and Mignard (2018), and Zúñiga and Hernández-León (2005).

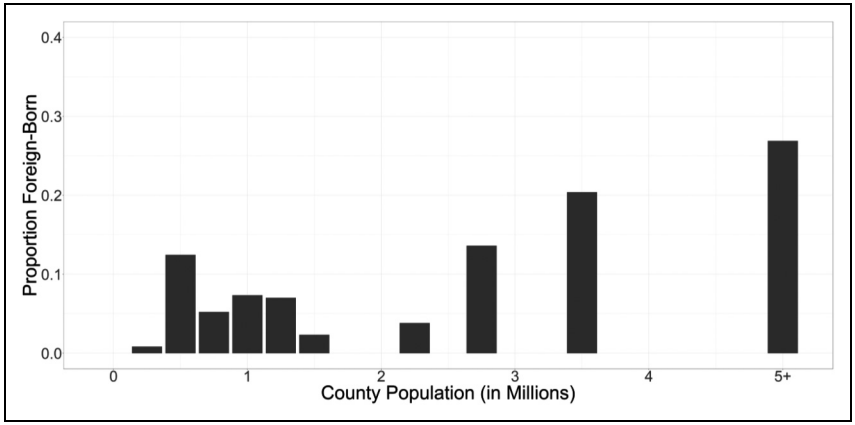


**Figure 4.** Foreign-Born Proportion in English Counties, Metropolitan Counties and London. *Source:* Data is drawn from July 2019 to June 2020 Estimates of the Annual Population Survey (APS), Office of National Statistics. Estimates from Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland are excluded.

2015; Gans 2009) and, thus, constrain our ability to advance a research agenda that seeks to exploit contextual difference in more systematic ways.

To repeat Brenner and Schmid's (2014, 747) argument here and apply it to categories common in migration studies, demographic definitions of urban and rural contexts "divide the indivisible" and "lump together the inessential." These categories divide the indivisible by starting from the supposition that places with large immigrant populations are fundamentally distinct from those with small ones or, alternatively, that places of historic immigration settlement (gateways) are distinct from those where immigrants are just arriving (new destinations). While size and recency of immigration may very well matter, there are many other contextual features that may or may not co-vary with population size or growth rates. Defaulting to population as the primary criterion of case selection risks overlooking variation in these other contextual features, including political climate, levels of ethnoracial diversity, labor market conditions, or physical environments.

On the flipside, demographic definitions can also lump together the inessential. There is no clear guidance as to what conditions are universally shared within cases with comparable populations and growth rates (Brenner and Schmid 2014). Places with large populations across the world, often deemed urban, are thought of in popular and academic discourse as similar in some fundamental way, while places with smaller populations, often deemed rural, are also thought of as similar independent of their location or characteristics (Angelo 2017; Brenner and Schmid 2014; Lichter and Brown 2011; Satterthwaite 2010). What exactly these similarities consist of typically remains unspecified (Brenner and Schmid 2014).

This lack of clarity is evident in the numerous typologies and notions of what constitutes a new destination, which has been defined at various growth rates and scales by

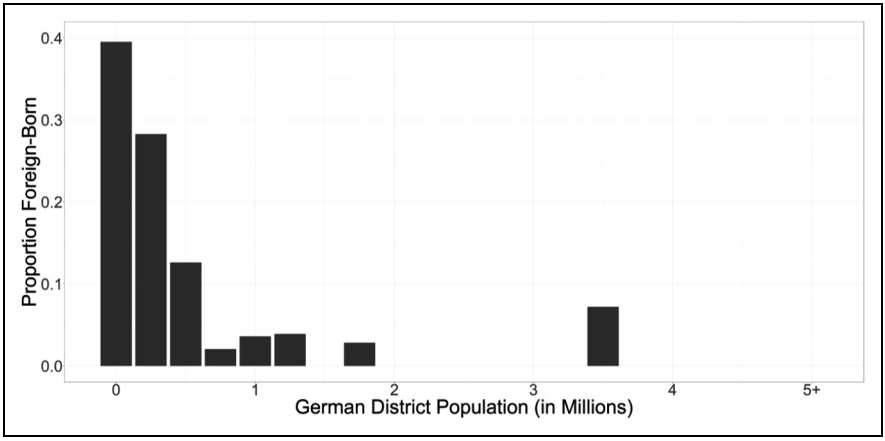


**Figure 5.** Foreigners in German Administrative Districts.
*Source:* Data is from 2020 population estimates of foreigners and the total population. German Federal Statistical Office.

different scholars (Ellis, Wright, and Townley 2014a; Lichter and Johnson 2009; Massey 2008; Singer 2004; see Winders 2014 for a review). This issue is similar to problems that have been encountered in other contextual fields, such as urban sociology, where demarcating the urban from the suburban and the rural has proven a perennially difficult task (Gans 2009). Some migration scholars have attempted to solve these conceptual issues by moving past populational definitions and identifying other contextual factors as relevant to integration. In reflecting on New York City's exceptionality, for example, Foner (2007) emphasizes the established nature of the immigrant population, the existence of immigrant institutions, extreme diversity, and multiculturalism as the defining features of local context. Winders (2014) has argued that in addition to high immigration rates, new destinations are characterized by the lack of ethnic institutions and co-ethnic support networks and by civic institutions unaccustomed to serving immigrant needs. In another example, Bean et al. (2012) compile a list of economic, cultural, and institutional factors that may influence integration. Despite this conceptual progress, population justifications for case selection remain quite common in the wider literature on immigrant integration. Ultimately, this approach circumscribes contextual variation in research sites and leaves context theoretically underspecified.

## Toward a More Systematic Study of Contexts of Integration

### *Five Components of Context*

Building on these recent attempts to move past population criteria (Bean et al. 2012; Foner 2007; Waldinger and Catron 2016; Winders 2014) for contextual case

selection, this section seeks to define and identify the features of context that are tied to immigrant integration outcomes and to understand how those features interact with one another. As Waldinger and Catron (2016) argue, contextual features should be objectively observable and measurable, rather than implied in factors such settlement size. But how do we know which components matter empirically for integration outcomes? Creating an exhaustive list of all possible features at every scale is impossible since, as Sampson (2011) has noted, studies of context are studies of everything.

Rather than starting from scratch, a better place to begin is with the idea of "contexts of reception" proposed by Alejandro Portes and his collaborators. To date, this concept has provided a rigorous framework for studying contextual effects in migration studies that has been widely adopted (Abascal 2017; Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger 2018b; Waldinger and Catron 2016).[8] This framework identifies and clearly defines three components of context that have been shown to be directly related to integration outcomes such as socioeconomic status or naturalization: "the policies of the receiving government; the character of the host labor market; and the features of… ethnic communities" (Portes and Rumbaut 2014, 138–39). The conceptual boundaries of these three components are more discrete than populational definitions and vary across space. It is more straightforward to argue that places are different on the basis of employment rates, the presence of an ethnic community, or the actions of local politicians than on population thresholds.

The contextual components identified by Portes and Rumbaut are certainly critical features that condition how immigrant life unfolds, but we need to expand this inventory to include additional components of context identified in the wider neighborhood effects and other social science literatures, including geography and economics (Sharkey and Faber 2014). Since scholars have shown various components to affect the life chances of the urban poor, we should expect these aspects of context to matter for immigrants as well, many of whom join the ranks of the poor, at least in the first generation (Alba and Foner 2015; Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters 2011; Haller, Portes, and Lynch 2011).

Through a careful review of migration and urban studies, I arrived at the five components of context listed in Table 4: the ethnic community, the nature of relations with the local population, local labor markets, the local institutional and organizational landscape, and the physical environment. Two of these, the ethnic community and local labor markets, have direct analogues in the Portes and Rumbaut (2014) framework. I subsume government policies into a category more broadly defined to encompass local institutions, which, thus, also includes the features of local bureaucracies and civic organizations. Finally, I have added two additional components (relations with the local population and the physical environment) emphasized in the neighborhood effects literature and highlighted in well-known

[8] As of 2021, Portes and Zhou (1993) has 7,733 citation on Google Scholar. Portes and Rumbaut (2014) has 9,202.

**Table 4.** Components of Context and Empirical Examples.

| Main component | Subcomponent | Examples of research |
|---|---|---|
| Ethnic community | Ethnic economy[a] | Gilbertson (1995); Portes and Bach (1985); Portes and Rumbaut (2014) |
| | Ethnic organizations | Castañeda (2020); Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad (2008); Zhou and Kim (2006) |
| | Ethnic community | Abascal (2017); Adida (2011); Brettell (2003); Donato, Stainback, and Bankston (2005); Felouzis (2005); Jiménez (2010); Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger (2018*b*), Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger (2018a) |
| Relations with the local population | Ethnic hostility[b] | Bilodeau and Fadol (2011); Carrigan and Webb (2013); Green, McFalls, and Smith (2001); Medina et al. (2018); Olzak (1992); Rustenbach (2010) |
| | Ethnic segregation and contact | McAvay (2018); McAvay and Safi (2018); Okamoto et al. (2020); Rugh and Massey (2014); Sharma (2018); Tran (2019); Vertovec (2007) |
| | Ethnic discrimination[c] | Ahmed and Hammarstedt (2008); Bosch, Carnero and Farré (2010); Pager, Bonikowski, and Western (2009) |
| Local labor markets | Market flexibility[d] | Castañeda (2018); Crowley, Lichter, and Turner (2015); Goodwin-White (2009); Luthra and Waldinger (2010) |
| | Mix of industries | Goodwin-White (2009); Lester and Nguyen (2016); Marrow (2011) |
| Local institutional and organizational landscape | Laws and policies | Brown (2013); Ellis et al. (2014b); Filomeno (2018); Schildkraut et al. (2019); Varsanyi (2010) |
| | Government institutions | Cappiali (2018); de Graauw (2018); Marrow (2009); Van der Leun (2006) |
| | Civic organizations[e] | Cordero-Guzmán (2005); de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad (2013); Mollenkopf and Pastor (2016); Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad (2008) |
| Physical environment | Pollution[f] | Pulido (2000); Stoiber et al. (2019) |

[a]See Gold (2015) for a review.
[b]See Green, McFalls, and Smith (2001) for a review on hate crimes.
[c]See Baldassarri and Abascal (2017), Pager (2007), and Pager and Shepherd (2008) for reviews.
[d]See Kalleberg (2000, 2009).
[e]I distinguish these from ethnic organizations that are primarily led and managed by immigrants. This follows distinctions that have been made elsewhere by Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad (2008).
[f]See Galster (2012) and Sharkey and Faber (2014) for reviews.

reviews of place and residential effects (Galster 2012; Sharkey and Faber 2014) and Raj Chetty's recent work (Chetty et al. 2014; Chetty and Hendren 2018b, 2018a).

Table 4 gives a sampling of literature from around the world that supports the selection of each component, with a focus on the literature on North America and Europe. These components impact immigrant integration outcomes, following Alba and Foner's (2015) definition that full integration implies parity of life chances with the native group.[9] Within this definition, integration is multi-dimensional, with social scientists typically concerned with socioeconomic status, spatial concentration, language acquisition, inter-marriage, political participation, and identity as benchmarks for integration (Alba and Foner 2015; Alba and Nee 2003; Kemppainen et al. 2020; Waters and Jiménez 2005; Waters and Pineau 2015). For some of these components, as I explain below, their relationship to an integration outcome is fairly direct (e.g., labor market structure and impact on wages), and for others, the connection between component and outcome is still debated (ethnic community and socioeconomic mobility). The five components can be further divided into 12 subcomponents. As with all compendia of hypotheses, this list is not meant to be exhaustive or final. Rather, it is a theoretically motivated selection of candidate components of context that are strongly suggested by existing research. Future comparative research may, and should, lead us to revise or refine this list. Let me elaborate on each of the five contextual components more fully.

- *Ethnic Community:* While there is no consensus on whether the presence of a strong ethnic community enhances mobility and integration in the long term (Alba and Foner 2015; Gold 2015; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Waters and Pineau 2015), there is more consensus that the ethnic community can be a key source of information, resources, and employment for new immigrant arrivals (Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhou and Kim 2006). There is wide variation in the nature of such communities across settlements, and in some places, they do not exist at all (Alba and Foner 2015; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008; Winders 2014). Work on ethnic communities across the world usually discusses three specific subcomponents: the ethnic economy (Gilbertson 1995; Gold 2015; Portes and Bach 1985), ethnic organizations (Castañeda 2020; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008; Zhou and Kim 2006), and co-ethnics' characteristics (Abascal 2017; Adida 2011; Brettell 2003; Donato, Stainback, and Bankston 2005; Felouzis 2005; Jiménez 2010; Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger 2018a, 2018b).
- *Relations with the Local Population:* Immigrants' life chances—socioeconomic and symbolic—are affected by the nature of ethnic or racial boundaries

[9] This definition of integration (or assimilation or integration, depending on the author's preferred terminology) has been subject to debate (Jung 2009; Penninx 2019). It is beyond this article's scope, however, to resolve these debates.

within the host country (Wimmer 2013). These ethnoracial boundaries are significant for immigrants who are easily categorized as foreign "others" or racialized as minority groups (Wimmer 2013). There is a wealth of evidence documenting structural differences in opportunities for minority groups in immigrant-receiving nations (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Alba and Foner 2015). Less discussed, but equally important, is evidence that ethno-racial relations vary at the sub-national level: geographic variation in attitudes toward immigrants has been amply documented, and there is evidence that behavior, including acts of discrimination, segregation, and hostility, clusters and varies across place as well (see Fussell 2014; Hopkins et al. 2016 for reviews). The subcomponents of this contextual feature that are most frequently cited in the literature on relations with the local population are variation in levels of hostility against immigrants (Bilodeau and Fadol 2011; Carrigan and Webb 2013; Green, McFalls, and Smith 2001; Medina et al. 2018; Olzak 1992; Rustenbach 2010), segregation and interpersonal contact (McAvay 2018; McAvay and Safi 2018; Okamoto et al. 2020; Rugh and Massey 2014; Sharma 2018; Tran 2019; Vertovec 2007), and discrimination in various spheres of life (Ahmed and Hammarstedt 2008; Bosch, Carnero, and Farré 2010; Pager, Bonikowski, and Western 2009).

- *Local Labor Markets:* The labor market structures the type of employment opportunities available to immigrants (Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2014). Given work's centrality in achieving economic self-sufficiency and social mobility over time, the labor market is a key component of context (Alba and Nee 2003; Bean et al. 2012; Portes and Rumbaut 2014). The labor market structure includes demand and supply for labor, wage levels, industrial composition, the presence of an informal economy, and skills-matching, but there is no general consensus as to which structures lead to better integration outcomes (Alba and Foner 2015). The character of employment opportunities varies substantially across settlements, not only in rates of labor force participation and real wages but also in the types of jobs and prevalence of contingent, part-time labor contracts (Fee, Wardrip, and Nelson 2019; Kalleberg 2000, 2009; Markusen and Schrock 2006; OECD 2018; Tienda and Fuentes 2014). Within this labor market component, prior work has most often emphasized two specific subcomponents as consequential to immigrant integration: the local labor market's flexibility (Castañeda 2018; Cohen and Kogan 2007; Crowley, Lichter, and Turner 2015; Kalleberg 2000; Luthra and Waldinger 2010), much of it tied to the informal economy, and the local mix of industries (Goodwin-White 2009; Lester and Nguyen 2016; Marrow 2011).
- *Local Institutional and Organizational Landscape:* Local government and other institutions such as churches or labor unions touch on practically all facets of immigrant life (Waters and Pineau 2015). From laws and regulations that dictate where individuals can live, work, and attend schools to organizations that try to either connect or exclude immigrants from access to public

services and civil-society networks, the local institutional and organizational landscape deeply impacts the structure of opportunity for new arrivals and the second generation (Waters and Pineau 2015). There is also substantial evidence that local government institutions can have positive consequences for the poor, including immigrants (Chetty and Hendren 2018b; Small 2009b). There is wide geographic variation in the nature of local laws, government institutions, and civil-society organizations (Bean et al. 2012; de Graauw 2018; Marrow 2009; Pilanti and Morales 2018; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008; Schiller 2018; van Ewijk and Nijenhuis 2016; Varsanyi 2010), especially in societies with a federal structure of government. Within this component, three subcomponents have been the focus of past research: local laws (Brown 2013; Ellis et al. 2014b; Filomeno 2018; Schildkraut et al. 2019; Varsanyi 2010), government institutions (Cappiali 2018; de Graauw 2018; Marrow 2009; Van der Leun 2006), and civic organizations (Cordero-Guzmán 2005; de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013; Mollenkopf and Pastor 2016; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008).

- *Physical Environment:* A growing, but underdeveloped, body of work connects features of the physical environment to health and socioeconomic outcomes, including pollution, sprawl, quality of the housing stock, and infrastructure (Galster 2012; Sharkey and Faber 2014). Evidence for the physical environment's impact on health and socioeconomic outcomes is strongest as it relates to pollution, especially lead poisoning (Galster 2012; Muller, Sampson, and Winter 2018), but there are studies showing that prolonged exposure to other toxins in air, water, and soil have deleterious effects on the health and cognitive outcomes of children and adults (see Galster 2012; Sharkey and Faber 2014 for reviews). Additionally, it is well established that environmental pollutants are more concentrated in the low-income and minority neighborhoods where immigrants often live and work (Desmond and Bell 2015; Galster 2012; Muller, Sampson, and Winter 2018).

## A Combinatorial Typology of Context Components

So far, I have suggested that five components of context, and their subcomponents, vary from destination to destination. For any given immigrant destination, each (sub) component of context could be assigned a value, and a determination could then be made about whether these components positively or negatively impact immigrant integration. A natural next step in developing a systematic framework for the study of context is to assemble a typology of local contexts of immigrant arrival and to evaluate what the empirical consequences of these components could be. However, an empirical evaluation of the components of context is well beyond this article's ambitions. Thus, I limit myself to outlining the typology and highlighting some of the new questions and avenues for future research that it suggests. For expository clarity, I use the initials for four of the five components of context to

form the acronym ERLI (**Ethnic** Community, **Relations** with the Local Population**, Labor** Markets**, Institutional** and Organizational Landscape). Since work on the physical environment is the least developed in migration studies, it is not included in this combinatorial framework for now.

To arrive at a manageable number of combinations, I dichotomize contextual features as having either a positive influence on immigrant outcomes (e.g., an ethnic community with lots of channels of upward social mobility for newcomers) or a negative influence (e.g., an ethnic community where newcomers are exploited and held down by co-ethnics, or alternately the complete absence of an ethnic community). Initials in the acronym are only present when their value is positive. Also, to keep the typology useable, I disregard the different sub-components, some of which might have opposite effects for immigrant integration trajectories. Table 5 shows all 16 possible combinations, ranging from most positive to most negative, and describing those places in-between these extremes.

To illustrate, the ERLI combination is a place that has a positive ethnic community, positive relations with the local population, positive labor markets, and positive institutions. We might expect New York, London, and Los Angeles to fit this categorization for immigrant groups that have an established presence in these cities. Another example would be an L context, places where the only positive aspect is a receptive labor market and all other aspects are negative. L places would be the many immigrant destinations where the labor market is the main draw but there is precious little else. L contexts could be cities like Dalton, Georgia, for Mexican immigrants or Guangzhou for Nigerian immigrants (Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2005; Haugen 2012). This typology, despite these simplifications, is already quite complex.

A few additional clarifications are in order. The sequence of letters does not imply a temporal order to the sequence in which components emerge; ERLI, in other words, does not mean that the ethnic community emerges first and institutions last. Furthermore, the order does not suggest anything about each component's relative importance. The sequence in which these components emerge and their relative weights are both empirical questions that this typology raises but does not resolve. Additionally, for simplicity's sake, the typology assumes that integration outcomes are one dimensional although integration is typically assessed along multiple dimensions (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964; Waters and Jiménez 2005). Context effects are most likely heterogeneous, depending on the integration outcome and specific population in question (Small and Feldman 2012; Sharkey and Faber 2014). As with each component's relative importance and sequencing, the typology leaves this question unanswered.

The typology is, thus, not without its limitations. Most importantly, there are active debates about what constitutes a positive and negative context for most components, as discussed in the "Five Components of Context" section, that require additional research. For instance, there would likely be little disagreement that contexts where the local population and institutions have attitudes and

**Table 5.** Combinations of Contextual Components.

| | Positive (+) | Negative (−) |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | ERLI | |
| 2 | ERL | I |
| 3 | ERI | L |
| 4 | ELI | R |
| 5 | RLI | E |
| 6 | ER | LI |
| 7 | EL | RI |
| 8 | EI | RL |
| 9 | RL | EI |
| 10 | RI | EL |
| 11 | LI | ER |
| 12 | E | RLI |
| 13 | R | ELI |
| 14 | L | ERI |
| 15 | I | ERL |
| 16 | | ERLI |

institutions that are inclusive of immigrants (R&I) aid immigrant integration. However, there are still substantial debates about co-ethnic communities' impact on immigrant integration (Alba and Foner 2015; Gold 2015; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Waters and Pineau 2015), particularly whether co-ethnics hinder or enhance second-generation life chances. More research is needed, but recent studies on this question in the United States suggest that co-ethnic presence and characteristics can have a positive impact on integration outcomes: having naturalized and educated co-ethnics improves individual immigrants' naturalization and education levels (Abascal 2017; Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger 2018a). Debates over what constitutes a positive or negative labor market remain active as well. Comparative discussions tend to focus on labor market differences at the national level (Alba and Foner 2015), and there is some evidence that rigid markets lead to slightly lower occupational attainment among immigrants over time (Cohen and Kogan 2007). Some work examines intranational variation in local labor markets (Goodwin-White 2009; Waldinger 2001), but mainly in major cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Another possible shortcoming is that the typology may overlook important components of context. This limitation could be because it omits consequential components or because the internal variation within components cannot be dichotomized. The first point could be resolved by including another component if it is theoretically motivated and empirically warranted. For example, it is possible that the physical environment will be revealed to be important to integration and, thus, that ERLI should expand to PERLI. However, the addition of even a single additional

component increases the typology's dimensionality two-fold (to 32 possible combinations). The typology's current version, in my view, hews the line between being comprehensive, coherent, and relevant (Wimmer 2013, 47) and remaining parsimonious and generative (Healy 2017). The next section discusses the heuristic value of the combinatorial typology of context I propose.

## Advantages of a Combinatorial Framework

*Clarify Cross-Site Similarity and Difference.* The main advantage of the typological framework described above is that it specifies variation in context more precisely than the existing focus on population size or newness. The typology suggests that sites can be similar, despite differences in population size, an implication that is likely to be borne out in empirical work. For example, new destinations like San José, California (~ 1 million) and gateway cities like New York City (~8 million) have been shown to have contexts similarly supportive of immigrant integration (Mollenkopf and Pastor 2016). Conversely, places with similar populations but different components of context might be shown to have different integration outcomes. Again, the literature supports this hypothesis. For example, Donato, Stainback, and Bankston (2005) study of Morgan City and Houma in Louisiana emphasizes the importance of institutional (I) and ethnic differences (E, R) in leading to different integration outcomes, despite the fact that these places are both small towns on the Bayou.

The typology also provides a way to make explicit and formalize an important insight in the new destinations literature—namely, that established gateways and new destinations cluster certain components of context (Waters and Jiménez 2005; Winders 2014). It is likely that established gateways will turn out to be ERLI contexts, while new destinations may only have one or two positive components, such as a propitious labor market [L] or a supportive, if small, ethnic community [E]. Thus, new destinations are defined by their constituent components—high immigration rates, the lack of ethnic institutions, the paucity of co-ethnics, civic institutions that are not accustomed to immigrant populations, and socio-cultural difference (Winders 2014)—as opposed to population size or newness as rough proxies for a whole bundle of components. Additionally, in this typology established gateways are a more theoretically precise mirror opposite of new destinations, that are not just distinguished by differences in the immigrant population or recent immigrant population growth.

The typology also provides a way to draw finer distinctions within the broad new destinations and established gateway categories and, thus, to create analytic space for in-between places. For example, the documented differences between major gateways can be characterized with more precision, using the combinatorial typology of contexts. We could typologize the places, all considered gateways, that Waldinger (2001) studies as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Places in Strangers at the Gates (Waldinger 2001).

| | Gateways vs. new destination | ERLI (+) | Sites |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Gateway | ERLI (for most immigrants) | New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco |
| 2 | Gateway | ERI (for most immigrants) | Miami |

The typology puts into sharp relief the major labor market difference that set Miami apart from the other four cases (Waldinger 2001, 315) in a way that is obscured by the broad gateways categorization. In this way, what appears to be a similar context using population criteria turns out to be different contexts of integration when seen through the more granularly defined combinatorial typology. Similarly, ERLI allows for more nuanced distinctions within the new destinations category. For example, we could say that the new destinations studied by Helen Marrow—Wilcox and Bedford Counties, North Carolina—are different from each other primarily because of differences in their labor markets. At the same time, we could more precisely identify new destinations around the world that are similar to one another because they have a shared combination of components, such as the case of Nigerians in Guangzhou [L] or of Chinese immigrants in Israel [L] (Haugen 2012; Minghuan 2012). The typology's usefulness is even clearer when applied to more ambitious comparative studies that compare within and across categories. For example, Mollenkopf and Pastor (2016), following the standard binary classification, describe New York (including Suffolk County), Chicago, and Los Angeles as established gateways and San José, the Inland Empire, Charlotte, and Phoenix as new destinations in their study of context of integration in the United States. However, Table 7 shows how the differences and similarities in the contexts of integration studied in this text become crisper with this typology, with more clearly described variation within categories and the interesting finding that established gateways (such as New York City) can have similar features to a new destination (in this case, San José).

*Conceptualize Relationships between Components.* Another advantage of the typology is that it animates questions about the relationships *between* components, leading us to ask how components might interact with one another and how combinations of components may create unique contexts of incorporation for immigrants. Furthermore, a broad empirical investigation of different contexts might show that certain combinations of components are more or less frequent than others or even that certain combinations never occur, thus leading to an empirical trimming of the typological tree. The clearest illustration of plausible bundling occurs within

**Table 7.** Places from "Unsettled Americans" (Mollenkopf and Pastor 2016, 20).

| | Gateway vs. new destination | ERLI (+) | Sites |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Gateway | ERLI (for most immigrants) | New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, |
| 2 | New destination | ERLI (for most immigrants) | San José |
| 4 | Gateway | ERL (for most immigrants) | Suffolk County |
| 5 | New destination | ELI (for most immigrants) | Inland Empire |
| 6 | New destination | LI (for most immigrants) | Charlotte |
| 7 | New destination | EL (for most immigrants) | Phoenix |

established gateways like New York, Los Angeles, and London, where co-ethnic communities, inter-ethnic relations, labor markets, and favorable institutions (ERLI) exist together. However, we can also think of other combinations that are empirically more plausible and, thus, frequent between the ERLI extremes. An RI context, for example, would be a place where relations with the local population are positive and institutions are receptive to immigrants, despite less than propitious market conditions and the absence of a large immigrant presence. Such places would be cities or towns with declining populations, some immigration history such that there would be a historical memory of ethnic diversity, and institutions trying to stem this decline—perhaps places like Buffalo, New York (Goldbaum 2019). LI contexts could be places where positive institutions reflect a need for immigrant labor, which exists in tandem with opposition to foreigners in the wider population. Dalton, Georgia (Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2005), or the experiences of Japanese Brazilians in Hamamatsu and Toyohashi, Japan, could be examples of such a context (Yamanaka 1999).

Conversely, are certain combinations of contextual features unstable, unlikely, or even non-existent? For instance, it is hard to identify off hand a site that might fit the RL context, where there is limited opposition to ethnic others by the local population and propitious labor markets, but a restrictionist local government. Similarly, it is difficult to think of an immigrant destination that only has favorable relations with natives [R] or favorable immigrant institutions [I]. In sum, the typology raises a whole set of new questions of how components of contexts interact with one another and whether there are other, perhaps historical or broader societal trends that could explain the relative frequency of certain combinations and, thus, the differential distribution of integration prospects across locales.

*Expanding the Sites of Contexts of Integration.* A final advantage of the typological framework is that it leads us to include immigrant destinations that have been

overlooked in the study of contexts of reception. Since the typology highlights differences in places on the basis of their concrete characteristics, it is likely that a wider set of places along the population continuum—the in-between places—will be studied using this conceptualization. This is because combinations of components might exists in places large, medium or small populations. Additionally, the typology suggests new sites of study. For example, an E context would be a place without economic opportunity, whose only advantage is a co-ethnic community. This E context describes a refugee camp, not often thought of as a context of integration, but a terribly common place of residence for displaced people around the world (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Tran and Lara-García 2020). Some might object to the inclusion of refugee camps, given that they are not final destinations. Yet so many people spend entire childhoods, even decades of their lives in these "temporary" contexts, which often become multi-generational over time,[10] that we should consider how these are sites of (dis)integration. The case of refugee camps is, thus, illustrative of how the combinatorial typology can help broaden the contexts that we consider relevant for the study of immigrant integration and enlarge the comparative horizon and analytical leverage that we gain by considering more variation in contexts that affect immigrant lives.

## *Implications for Research Design*

How could the hypotheses derived from a configurational typology of context be tested empirically? One obvious possibility is to study as many local contexts as possible, using large-N methods that can account for nested, scalar contexts and for selectivity through the use of multi-level and longitudinal methods. Perhaps the best example of large-N quantitative work is Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger (2018a) in their recent book, *Origins and Destination.* Although still limited in geographic coverage, this book examines second-generation integration paths, using surveys fielded in New York and Los Angeles and carefully disentangling the effects of various aspects of the ethnic community and relations with the local population. Of course, data quality is the big constraint to this approach, which requires (a) wide geographic coverage, (b) detailed information on context, and (c) rich information on individual and ethnic group characteristics. Data that meet these three criteria are in short supply (although see INED 2009), especially since the major immigration surveys of the world are fielded primarily in large cities and, thus, lack contextual variation intra-nationally (Crul and Mollenkopf 2012; Mollenkopf, Kasinitz, and Waters 2011; Rumbaut et al. 2008). Future survey research should expand contextual variation such that there are enough high-quality observations

[10] This experience is certainly the case of Lhotshampa refugees in Nepal and the scores of persecuted ethnic minorities that have fled Burma for neighboring countries (Tran and Lara-García 2020).

outside major urban centers. Doing so, of course, presents sampling challenges, but some can be overcome by innovations in online and social media surveys (Schneider and Harknett 2019).

A second way to study context is to use carefully chosen comparisons designed to identify context effects, following the tradition of small-N comparative research (Bloemraad 2013; FitzGerald 2012; Martiniello 2013). In the neighborhood effects literature, small-N designs have provided powerful evidence of how contextual mechanisms work and generated a number of important hypotheses (Small and Feldman 2012; Sharkey and Faber 2014). Most-similar case designs study the impact of a specific contextual feature by comparing cases that are at opposite ends of a continuum of variation but otherwise reasonably similar, and this approach is especially promising for understanding how specific contextual features shape incorporation processes (Bloemraad 2013; FitzGerald 2012; Flyvbjerg 2006; Small 2009a). When possible, comparative small-N designs should select cases from as large a universe as possible, which will make it easier to satisfy the *ceteris paribus* clause. Marrow's (2011) *New Destination Dreaming* and Jiménez's (2010) *Replenished Ethnicity* are good templates for this approach. Both study similar immigrants across place, compare across similar scales, and select their contexts deliberately using direct, theoretically motivated measures of context. In Marrow's case, there are contextual differences in inter-ethnic relations and the structure of the local labor market, while in Jiménez's study, there are differences in the nature of the ethnic community as a product of varying degrees of replenishment.

A final possibility is using QCA methods for medium-N analysis (Ragin 2009), which are ideally suited to explore arguments of a combinatorial and equifinal nature, as these strategies allow researchers to systematically investigate which different combinations of conditions lead to the same outcome. My review was unable to find studies exemplifying this approach in migration studies, but such work could explore the necessary and sufficient conditions that lead to integration for the various combinations of components identified in ERLI.

## Summary and Conclusions

In migration studies, understandings of local context are comparatively underdeveloped. This limited understanding may be due to the fact most immigrants were arriving and settling in large, urban centers that were similar to one another during periods of mass immigration in the early-twentieth century. However, this spatial concentration of immigration flows is decidedly no longer the case, providing scholars with an opportunity to better understand the contextual factors that help immigrants integrate successfully. To do so, this article has argued that we need a more systematic approach to studying how context shapes integration trajectories. I have shown that recent migration studies privilege a select group of exceptional places, usually rural settlements or large cities, and, therefore, truncate the comparative horizon of inquiry.

This bifurcated case selection makes it more difficult to understand context effects, primarily because variation on contextual features is circumscribed.

Relatedly, bifurcated case selection is, in part, also the result of an overreliance on population criteria (the immigrant population's size and newness) as the guiding principles for case selection. In the absence of a more detailed and more rigorously defined understanding of context, migration studies has privileged the study of contexts at the "rural" or "urban" extremes.

To overcome the theoretical under-specification inherent in populational criteria and to advance understandings of the role that context plays in integration processes, I have suggested that scholars select sites on the basis of those components of context that are observable and relevant to integration outcomes. Relying on segmented assimilation theory, on the one hand, and on the neighborhood effects literature, on the other hand, I identified five components—the ethnic community, the nature of relations with the local population, local labor markets, the local institutional and organizational landscape, and the physical environment—which have been shown to affect immigrant integration trajectories and which should, therefore, form the basis for more systematic future work.

These five components led to a heuristic typology, which reflects possible combinations of contextual features. This combinatorial typology gave rise to a series of hypotheses: that similarly urban and large or rural and small places might share some contextual features but systematically differ on others; that some combinations of contextual components are empirically more plausible and, thus, more frequent than others; and that some combinations of contexts have largely been overlooked in migration studies, despite forming part of the same, theoretically defined universe of cases. Beyond suggesting the need for more research describing the types of contexts of integration that exist, this article has also argued that we need further evaluation of the positive and negative impact of certain components—namely, the physical environment, the ethnic community, and labor markets—across immigrants living in a wider set of settlements. I closed this discussion of principles with a short reflection of their implications for future research design.

In a short essay written two decades ago, Waldinger (1996) made the case for bringing the "urban" back into immigration research. Substituting the term "urban" with the more general term "context," this article has renewed that call and offered some suggestions on how to answer it as systematically as possible. Knowing when, why, and where local features matter for immigrant life chances is critical for understanding what tools local governments and civil society actors have at their disposal for putting immigrants on a path toward prosperity and what components of contexts remain beyond their reach. As changes to immigration policy stall in national legislatures across the world, local approaches might lead to more effective integration strategies. Careful and systematic research on the consequences of context for immigrant integration is, therefore, of utmost relevance to making the places where immigrants settle more capable of promoting the success and well-being of all their residents, no matter where they come from.

## Author Note

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