Chapter One | Introduction

[Approximately] 34 million foreign-born people lived in the United States in 2002 . . . with the size of the U.S.-born second generation numbering around 32 million, so that immigrants and their children together totaled almost 66 million people, or about 23 percent of the U.S. population.


Overall, respondents are more likely to be against immigration than in favor of it. When forced to choose between two positions, a majority of respondents said that we should “strictly limit” immigration (58.1 percent) rather than “keep our doors open” (41.9 percent).

—Mizrahi (2005)

I would like to speak as American people do. It’s my dream. Sometimes I’m thinking, when am I going to think like American people?


From each of these voices of immigration—the dispassionate statistical accounts of aggregated movement of people from one country to another, the distilled summaries of attitude surveyors, and the often fervent statements from immigrants themselves—we learn something about the phenomenon of integration, but from none do we grasp a full picture. The story of immigration is one of tremendous scope, spanning centuries, continents, and diverse ethnic origins. In its magnitude, immigration raises questions that run the gamut from individual motives to international policies. Over the years many social scientists have devoted their energies to understanding parts of the picture, from the Chicago sociologists in the
To Be an Immigrant

early twentieth century (perhaps most notably depicted in The Polish Peasant in Europe and America) to the rapidly developing coterie of immigration researchers at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Hirschman, Kasinitz, and DeWind 1999). Hundreds of books and thousands of articles have reported on some aspect of the immigration story.

Given this plenty, one might wonder what remains to be explored. From my perspective, despite the considerable work that has been done, unanswered—and indeed, in many cases, unasked—questions about the experience of immigration remain. At the risk of oversimplification, our current understandings of immigration can be said to be most thoroughly analyzed from two quite different perspectives. On the one side, demographers and other social scientists have extensively charted the large-scale movements of people from one country to another, and in some cases within a single country—in contemporary China, for example, where the massive movement of people from rural areas to major cities are being observed. Using the categorical tools of their trade, they have compared generational, ethnic, and (less frequently) gender groups on outcomes such as employment and education. From these accounts, we learn much about broad-gauge patterns and trends, about differences between groups from different countries and different areas of the world, and about generational differences in the achievements of immigrant populations. Yet, as Suzanne Model has said, “census analysis cannot uncover human motives” (2001, 79).

The perspective that emerges from autobiographies, journalistic accounts, and some ethnographies speaks more directly to these motivational issues. In this ever-increasing stock of stories, with their mixture of pain and humor and challenge, we gain a more vivid sense of the individual experience—of the choices, the obstacles, the opportunities, and the accomplishments. In these accounts we have a much greater sense of the immigration experience as a dynamic process rather than an easily tabulated change of location. So too do we begin to appreciate the importance of the context into which an immigrant comes and the ways in which the features of that context—the social networks, the opportunity structures, the confrontations with hostile or supportive members of resident host communities—play an important role in the overall experience. Yet here as well there are some limitations. Focusing exclusively on the individual case does not allow us to assess the generality of that experience or to explore the ways in which that experience could be altered by changed circumstances. My goal in this book is to take both of these broad perspectives into account and at the same time offer a new framework for understanding what it is to be an immigrant, a framework that is more individual than the demographer’s and more general than the autobiographer’s.
Different paradigms and different intellectual traditions bring to an area of investigation their unique lenses, which shape both the questions and the answers that emerge (Morawska 2003). To a demographer, for example, the categories of census reports become a key predictor (or independent variable, in the language of experimentation). Similarly, outcomes of interest are those that are represented in available quantitative records, such as rates of employment, levels of education, or indices of residential segregation. Anthropologists focus their attention on specific societies, locating patterns of behavior in a specific time and space and seeking to characterize the folkways of a particular society through observations gained by participating in the cultural milieu. More individualized accounts are adopted by those who speak to individual immigrants: both questions and answers are different, as narrative account takes precedence over quantitative indices. Family members, people in neighborhoods, churches, and workplaces, letters sent home—these are some of the building blocks of the storyteller. One of the earliest works in the immigration literature—The Polish Peasant in Europe and America—made rich use of the letters sent between immigrants to the United States and their families back in Poland.

I come to the topic of immigration as a social psychologist with a different set of paradigms and a different intellectual tradition, with the goal of exploring the domain that lies between the demographic category and the first-person account. Following the guidance offered me in a Chinese fortune cookie, I hope that in posing some different questions about the immigrant experience, I will reveal some new answers that will interest all who think about immigration today. As a psychologist, I pay attention to the perspective of the individual immigrant, as he or she views both the self and the surrounding society. As a social psychologist, I always consider the context in which people operate and negotiate their lives—contexts that include not only the immediate social and physical surroundings, but cultural belief systems and political and economic realities as well. Thus, the theoretical framework that I use throughout this book is one of persons in contexts. Such a framework gives priority neither to the individual as sole agent nor to the environment as sole determinant. Rather, the intersection of the two becomes the place of analytic exploration. Almost as a corollary of this assumption, I arrive at no single description of the immigration experience. Different individuals, as members of different groups, arrive in different cultural and historical contexts, and the ways in which their experience plays out depends on the mixture of elements.
A central concept in my analysis is the socially constructed identities of immigrants themselves. Although such identities are in some respects intensely personal, insofar as they are part of the way in which a person sees him- or herself, they are at the same time shaped by the social realities of the society in which the person lives. Thus factors as broad as cultural beliefs and as immediate as daily interactions with members of other ethnic groups shape the identity of the individual. To be an immigrant is to be part of this socially embedded experiential world.

I also assume that immigration is both a dynamic and a symbolic process rather than a discrete event. Immigration is an experience that begins before people move away from their country of origin and that continues long after they arrive in a new country. Immigration is not a “done deal” but instead a part of one’s life that continues to have relevance in years and indeed generations to come. Here is where issues of meaning, of expectation and of memory, must be considered as well as the processes of active identity negotiation.

ELEMENTS OF THE ANALYSIS

In figure 1.1, I offer a general framework for the discussions that follow. This framework is adapted from a model of personality and social structure developed by Thomas Pettigrew (1997), whose approach is wholly consistent with the person in context approach I adopt. Three levels of analysis are considered, what Pettigrew terms the macro, meso, and micro levels. The macro level describes events and phenomena associated with the larger social structure—with the institutions, organizations, and cultural representations of a society. At the micro level is the individual—the person whose attitudes, values, motivations, and actions are the ultimate concern of most psychologists. Between these two levels of analysis is what Pettigrew terms a meso level, a point of focus that links the individual to the social system. Here is where social interaction takes place, as people engage one another and, in so doing, transmit their own positions and are impacted by the attitudes and behaviors of others. The meso level thus serves a critical mediational role, the vehicle by which the macro events in a society become represented in the individual psyches of its members and, from the other direction, by which the actions of individuals have an impact on the larger society. It is here that a social psychology of immigration makes its major contributions.

Let me describe more specifically how this general model can be applied to the analysis of immigration. At the macro level of social structure, I look to the political, demographic, and social factors that define the climate of immigration in a given society. Some aspects of this context, such as political policies and demographic patterns of immigration flow, are
Figure 1.1 Basic Elements of an Immigration Analysis

Macro: Social Structures
Immigration policy, demographic patterns, social representations

Meso: Social Interactions
Intergroup attitudes and behaviors, stereotypes, social networks

Micro: Individuals
Attitudes, values, expectations, identities, motivations, memories

Source: Adapted from Pettigrew (1997).

primarily the domain of political scientists and demographers, respectively; yet insofar as they are part of the lived experience of immigrants, they must be considered in a psychological analysis as well. Policy and demographics are clearly interrelated: which people immigrate to a country and how many people immigrate depend directly on the specifics of political policy and legislation (for an analysis of Mexican immigration
that emphasizes the interrelationships, see Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). Further, it can be argued that the relationship between these two components is bidirectional. The influence of policy on immigration numbers is obvious, but it is also true that patterns of immigration can affect subsequent policy, mediated by the influence of the social and political attitudes of the citizenry.

Social representations are introduced as another aspect of the macro level of analysis. Here the emphasis is distinctly social psychological—a concern with the shared images that people have about immigration in their society. Is the dominant image one of a melting pot, as has been the tradition in the United States? Or does the prevailing image place more emphasis on maintaining cultural diversity, as is characteristic of Canada? As suggested by the Canadian case, in which diversity is official federal policy, social representations are intimately related to both demographics and doctrine. Policies are, at their roots, a reflection of the norms and values of a society. At the same time, a society’s representations of immigrants are influenced by demographic realities—who is coming, how many are coming, and what political and economic challenges they present. Not surprisingly, then, social representations are considered to be a dynamic rather than static element—a process of representing as well as the representation itself (Moscovici 1988).

Both policies and social representations can have a direct impact on the individual immigrant—a visa granted, for example, or an image of the host country presented to the immigrant reader in a newspaper or television show. Many macro-level factors are filtered, however, through actions and interactions at what I am calling the meso level of analysis. Depicted at the meso level in figure 1.1 are some of the many forms of social interaction that operate between the individual and society. Social attitudes, for example, encompass a set of beliefs about both immigration policy and immigrants themselves that are more sharply articulated than general social representations of the phenomena. At a more specific level, the concept of group stereotypes is another element of the social context. People not only hold beliefs about the characteristics and contributions of immigrants in general, but also have attitudes about specific groups of immigrants. These attitudes and stereotypes are communicated to immigrants through the media as well as through direct social interactions, in abundance if not necessarily with consistency of message.

One part of understanding the meso-level processes requires a detailed analysis of the kinds of social interactions in which an immigrant is engaged, and what social networks constitute the lived space. Some of these interactions are with others who share a culture and immigration history; others are with members of the host country who may have few common experi-
ences and limited understanding of the immigrant’s life. These varied interactions and networks shape the social context in which the immigrant life is defined, creating both an ongoing climate as well as situational perturbations.

At the micro level of figure 1.1 are the immigrants themselves—those people who enter a context that is defined broadly by elements of policy and social representations and that is permeated by more targeted attitudes and stereotypes about their condition and their group. As conceptualized here, the immigrant is not simply a number or a static condition, but rather is the site for a variety of social psychological processes, which are captured by the general rubric of identity negotiation. It is at this site that the experience of being an immigrant becomes real, forming and changing within a societal context of people and places.

Identity here is conceived very broadly, including self-definition, language usage, social and cultural habits, friendship networks, and other significant aspects of social and psychological life. For the immigrant, identity negotiation is a continuing process of situating oneself—of defining the self in relation to other people and other groups, all taking place under the larger societal umbrella. Also included in the general model is a recognition that immigrants come from somewhere with some things—things in this case not in the sense of material possessions, though those are certainly not unimportant and worthy of study in their own right, but rather with a set of expectations about what the new country will provide and how one will establish a life for oneself, and in many cases one’s family. This psychological suitcase also includes a set of memories and images of the people and places of one’s origin, some of which will be discarded over time and others of which will continue to influence one’s identity (though often in altered form). In this analysis, both expectation and memories are in part individual and in part collective. Although they have a reality in the life of individuals, they at the same time are often shared images that reflect a co-construction process during both pre- and post-immigration periods.

These three levels form the basis of my perspective on what it means to be an immigrant, together with the assumption that social context is a critical mediator between individual and social system. Much of the existing research in immigration considers the direct, unmediated paths between individual and social system, as when the occupational opportunity structure, for example, is analyzed for its impact on individual employment, or when individual motivations are considered the direct precursor of immigration flow. Like Pettigrew (1997), I believe that social psychology has an important role in the space between macro and micro. More interested in the individual than sociology as a whole, more aware of context and structure than most psychologists, the social psychologist has both the
opportunity and responsibility to work within this middle kingdom. It is here that the knowledge of what happens in immigration can be supplemented with a deeper understanding of how and why.

Using the pivotal concept of immigrant identity, I have developed a framework that considers how social forces, both large and small, shape the contexts in which immigrants must locate and define themselves. Not all immigrants encounter the same contexts; not all immigrants make the same choices within the contexts that they experience. But as we become more fully aware of the contingencies of the immigrant experience, we will better understand how different pathways develop and different outcomes result. It is in pursuit of that understanding that this volume is developed.

A PREVIEW OF THINGS TO COME

In the chapters that follow, I present my case for a social psychological perspective on immigration. Consistent with the model shown in figure 1.1, this analysis incorporates phenomena and processes at the level of the system as well as the level of the individual. Immigrant identity is a key concept for my analysis, but it can only be understood within the broader frame of social structure and social settings.

Chapter 2 sets the stage as I consider the broad contextual factors—policies, demography, and social representations—that define the arena in which an immigrant’s experience is played out. Policies such as the immigration laws of 1924 and 1965, which respectively narrowed and widened the windows of opportunity, are discussed as they affected the flow of immigrants to the United States. These concrete events are coupled with an analysis of the more abstract representations of immigration that have been prevalent. Further, as a way of appreciating the historical and cultural specifics of immigration, I make a comparison with the Canadian case, which both shares similarities and illustrates important differences. As will be shown, these cultural and political parameters serve to establish boundary conditions for an individual immigrant’s possibilities and potentialities.

Chapter 3 reviews the considerable literature on attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy and considers how those attitudes have both changed and not changed over decades. Through years of survey data collection, often containing the same questions repeated on a regular basis, we have learned much about the ways in which the citizenry as a whole views immigration policies. Should immigration quotas be reduced? Should policy be adjusted to allow more immigrants to enter the country? In addition to these questions about overarching policy are beliefs about the characteristics of immigrants in general: do they contribute to the economy and
the social good or are they a drain on the resources of the country? Again,
repeated surveys provide much information here. Beneath the simple
numbers indicating approval or disapproval lies the stuff of social psy-
chological analysis—the motives and attributions that support expressed
beliefs. In this analysis I also consider the correspondence or divergence
that exists between the attitudes of those in the host country and the atti-
tudes of immigrants themselves, as they each define their goals for an
optimal society.

In chapter 4 attitudes towards immigrants are particularized, consid-
ered at the level of stereotypes about specific ethnic groups. Stereotypes of
ethnic and national groups have been documented for at least eighty years
in the social science literature. In the course of these analyses, distinct pro-
files have emerged for most groups who have come to the United States in
substantial numbers. These profiles often differ substantially, both in their
overall evaluative tone and in the particular elements thought to charac-
terize a group. Some immigrants are believed to be better than others—
more desirable, better educated, more motivated, or more law-abiding.
Others are thought to embody character deficits and moral depravity.
Which group is perceived to be better or worse is not necessarily constant,
however, if we look over a long span of history. As just one example,
stereotypes of both Japanese and Chinese in the United States have
changed dramatically over the past century, from being depicted as evil
and immoral forces to what is now often labeled a model minority. Thus,
like other elements of context, analysis of group stereotypes requires a con-
sideration of change. Equally important, however, is an understanding of
how stereotypes operate to influence the interactions between immigrant
and host, often taking the form of discriminatory behavior directed at
immigrant groups. These meso-level phenomena are critical to the expe-
rience of immigrants and to their definition of self.

At the heart of my analysis is the concept of ethnic and national identity,
which will be the focus of chapter 5. As a social psychological concept,
ethnic identity moves away from the static categorization of the census
report to the subjectively claimed conception of self. Although identity is
subjective, it is not wholly individual; rather, it can be understood as a
marker of association with other people who share similar views and ways
of identifying themselves at a particular place and time. Ethnic identity is
a concept far more complex than was earlier recognized. It is multifaceted,
it is dynamic in nature, and it combines with other aspects of social iden-
tification, such as religion, gender, and politics. Further, ethnic identities
themselves can be multiple, as the growing body of literature on trans-
nationalism suggests. Both specific examples and general structures of
identity will be considered in this chapter.
Chapter 6 continues the analysis of identity with a detailed look at the processes of identity negotiation. In the literature of immigration, assimilation theory dominated the thinking about ethnic and national identification for much of the twentieth century. Initially these models posited a steady move from identification in terms of one’s country of origin to identification with the new society (primarily the United States in these accounts). The comfortable predictability of this model began to falter, however, in the post-1965 immigration period as it became clear that not all groups took on the new American identity with equal ease. The recognition that different groups of immigrants might experience different trajectories of assimilation was a first step in a more complex analysis. I complicate that analysis further, shifting it to a more psychological plane on which persons negotiate their ethnic and national identities in varying contexts. By looking more closely at some of these contextual factors, I believe we gain a far deeper understanding of how immigrants are defining, negotiating, and combining identities to yield more differentiated patterns than early assimilation models allowed.

In chapter 7 I focus on one group of immigrants—those from the English-speaking countries of the Caribbean—and interpret their experience in terms of the overall framework that I have developed. Thus I begin with an analysis of immigration policies and demographic movements, as they pertain to West Indian immigrants, and then move on to consider specific attitudes toward these groups. Shifting to the perspective of the West Indian immigrant, I then look at the ways in which these primarily Afro-Caribbean immigrants define and negotiate their identities and how these identity positions influence other forms of behavior.

In the final chapter, I look in both directions—back in the sense of summarizing the overarching perspective that I have taken, and forward with the aim of considering what might come next. As a researcher, my comments will emphasize some directions that seem to me most likely to be empirically and theoretically productive. As a citizen concerned with the lives and experiences of immigrants, I will offer some thoughts on the possible policy implications that are suggested by the social psychological analysis I have undertaken here. What value is added by this approach, and how might policy makers become more effective if this new perspective was taken into account?

In his classic text *The Uprooted* (1951), Oscar Handlin claimed that he was reversing the direction of previous discussions of immigration by focusing on the effects of immigration on the immigrants themselves, rather than looking at their impact on society at large. To study these effects, Handlin looked at letters from immigrants to family and friends, at newspapers directed to the immigrant communities, and at immigrant fiction. The pic-
ture he painted was in many respects quite bleak. As he forecast in the book’s preface, his story was one of “broken homes, interruptions of a familiar life, separation from known surroundings, the becoming a foreigner and ceasing to belong” (1951, 4). Alienation was a key theme for Handlin as he focused on the lives of first-generation immigrants.

Although I share Handlin’s interest in focusing on the experiences of immigrants themselves, my view of those experiences is less dark than Handlin’s. Without denying the feelings of loneliness, alienation, and helplessness that immigrants then and now experience, I also see evidence of a more positive dynamic of negotiation and change. Because of vast changes in communication availability and travel possibilities, initial information about the host country and the subsequent capability of connecting with others, both within this country and back to the place of origin, are very different than they were a half century ago. These changes do not mean that the immigrant experience today is inevitably better, but it is certainly different in many respects. As Nancy Foner (2000) reminds us, however, not everything about contemporary immigration is a new story; many similarities and continuities with past immigration can be found. Moreover, I deviate from Handlin in causal emphasis as well. In exploring the impact of transition and social forces on the immigrants, Handlin tended, perhaps inadvertently, to deprive the actors of agency. Their story, as he told it, was one of reacting to forces seemingly out of their control. My account is a more agentic one: while giving full consideration to the macro factors that influence the immigrant experience, I also look to the opposite direction of influence, as indicated in figure 1.1. The flow of causality runs in both directions, and the mediation by situational factors and social interaction contributes much to the form and the positivity of an immigrant’s life. With acknowledged debts to Handlin and to all of the other scholars who have preceded me, I offer here my view of what it means to be an immigrant.