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Possibilities for Sociological Research to Reduce Inequalities: Observations from the Immigration Scholarship

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Abstract

This commentary brings immigration research to the conversation on sociology's possibilities to respond to inequality. It argues that legal status today has become an important dimension of inequality given its enduring impact across most areas of life and effects that extend laterally to all members of a family and across generations. The piece highlights the possibilities for sociologists to contribute to policy discussions but also the limitations of research in policy spaces given the antiscience resistance in the sociopolitical context today.

Keywords

immigration law; legal status; political context; policy

When Adam Gamoran invited me to participate in this conversation by commenting on these two articles (DiPrete and Fox-Williams 2021; Nalani, Yoshikawa, and Carter 2021) in the *Socius* "Special Collection: Sociology's Role in Responding to Inequality," I immediately accepted. I did so because the questions that these articles engage resonate strongly with me; they have been central in my career as a sociologist since I started graduate school. Back then with peers, we would discuss whether the knowledge we were acquiring would "just sit there" or would one day be used "in the real world" to inform solutions to the problems we were studying. We agreed that sociologists, more than any other social scientists, had the understanding and skills to formulate concrete paths to address inequalities; our discussions there-fore focused on *how* this could be achieved. But we lacked the models and the vocabulary for public sociology or policy sociology (Burawoy 2021) that we now have. Today, sociologists have fine-tuned discussions, developed ways of thinking and engaging in policy and public roles, and proposed concrete avenues for effecting social change based on our work.

In these comments, I draw parallels between what the authors of these two articles propose, the critical questions they raise, and the challenges they pose for us as we consider how

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we can mobilize our collective sociological knowledge to inform approaches to address profound inequalities. I reflect on the relevance of these arguments for what we know (and do) in immigration research and the possibilities for making a dent in undoing the harms that multiple laws and policies are doing to immigrants today. Immigrants constitute a significant (and growing) segment of the U.S. population, and thus considerations about how sociological research can be relevant to inequality reduction within this population can have broad impact.

Immigration Status as an Axis of Inequality

Perhaps the social position from the immigration scholarship that parallels closest the conversation in these articles is legal status. Legal status, like gender, social class, race, and other dimensions of social inequality, deeply shapes individuals' life chances. Indeed, there is general agreement among scholars today that legal status has emerged as a dimension of inequality for immigrants and their families that cuts across all spheres of life in enduring fashion and, as such, it represents a fundamental factor shaping immigrant integration today (Massey 2007; Menjívar, Abrego, and Schmalzbauer 2016; Waters and Pineau 2015). Among the hundreds of immigrants I have interviewed in my various projects, legal status is simply life altering (even life giving). This is especially the case when legal status intersects with other aspects of inequality, such as race, and “racialized legal status” impacts certain groups more than others, thus amplifying inequalities across immigrant groups (Menjívar 2021).

Today, legal status counts for more but at the same time has become significantly more difficult to obtain (especially for certain groups, such as Latinos). A barrage of laws and policies at different levels of government has elevated the weight of legal status, brightening the boundaries of an undocumented status (Gonzales and Ruszczyk 2021) to generate harmful consequences for the population classified as undocumented. With some exceptions,¹ governments at all levels have made legal status a requirement to obtain certain benefits, including access to education, health care and insurance,² cash assistance, and other public programs (Perreira and Pedroza 2019). At the same time, paths to obtain secure legal statuses have narrowed dramatically (for some groups, these paths have closed), and legal status also has become a target for immigration enforcement. Furthermore, immigrants in vulnerable legal statuses today spend longer and more uncertain periods of time in these statuses, significantly amplifying the enduring effects of legal status.

Today, undocumented immigrants are considered long-term residents. In 2017, the “average undocumented immigrant” had been living in the United States for 15 years (Passel and Cohn 2019), and most immigrants on Temporary Protected Status (TPS) have been in the United States for over two decades (Menjívar, Agadjanian, and Oh 2020). And as years of U.S. residence increase for undocumented immigrants, the share of households where U.S-

¹This is especially the case at the federal level. There is variation at the state and municipal levels, with some states making resources, such as health care and opportunities for higher education, available to undocumented immigrants, as in the case of California and Massachusetts. Other states, however, such as Arizona and Georgia, have instituted policies that amplify the harsh effects of federal-level policies.

²For instance, the Affordable Care Act of 2010 explicitly excludes undocumented immigrants (Waters and Pineau 2015), formally barring approximately 10 million people from this benefit.

born children live with an undocumented immigrant parent has increased (Passel and Cohn 2018), which expands the effect of legal status across generations. Importantly, although formally it is against the law to discriminate against individuals on the basis on race, gender, sexual preference, religious affiliation, and so on, laws today *require* discriminatory treatment based on legal status in institutional contexts (Menjívar et al. 2016). For these reasons, legal status has become a preeminent axis of inequality among immigrants and their families, leading some scholars to argue that it is a “master status” given its impact on immigrants’ long-term trajectories (Gonzales and Ruszczyk 2021), or a “last straw” (Enriquez 2017), where other social locations “set the stage” for disadvantages that legal status pushes and amplifies.

As with other trends of inequality, we have acquired a great deal of knowledge about the inequalities and long-term consequences that legal status creates. For instance, we know that although legal status is conferred on individuals, its effects are felt in families (Martinez-Aranda 2020), especially in mixed-status families that include members who hold various legal and citizenship statuses. Thus, the migration scholarship has focused efforts on capturing these broader effects, which impact the approximately 16.6 million people living in these families (Enriquez 2015). This scholarship has illuminated the potentially enduring effects of parental legal status on their children’s well-being (Yoshikawa 2011) because parents in vulnerable legal statuses refrain from accessing benefits for their eligible children, even U.S.-born children, to avoid interacting with governmental institutions. For instance, undocumented parents of U.S.-born children who are eligible for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) or WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) are less likely to participate in these programs (Bovell-Ammon et al. 2019; Kaushal, Waldfogel, and Wight 2014), especially in localities with higher levels of immigration enforcement (Vargas and Pirog 2016). So potent are the negative effects of a fragile legal status in mixed-status families (e.g., the fear of deportation, diminished rights, and lack of access to good jobs and social benefits) that they reverberate laterally and multigenerationally (Enriquez 2015), disadvantaging everyone in a family and even the grandchildren (Bean, Brown, and Bachmeier 2015).

The detrimental effects of living in vulnerable legal statuses have been found across the life course, which points to the singular nature of legal status to affect individuals’ life chances. A parent’s insecure legal status negatively affects birth weight, especially in states with increased immigration enforcement (Novak, Geronimus, and Martinez-Cardoso 2017; Torche and Sirois 2019). We also know that mothering practices are shaped by legal status as mothers in vulnerable legal statuses creatively manage access to resources for their children (Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2018; Diaz McConnell and Yellow Horse 2021). Parents’ legal status also impacts children’s developmental contexts, social emotional well-being (Brabeck and Sibley 2016), and cognitive and educational development (Yoshikawa 2011). Legal status as a structural determinant of health has been shown to have multiple effects (Asad and Clair 2018; Perreira and Pedroza 2019), with the varying levels of security that different legal statuses confer corresponding to stratified health care possibilities (Van Natta et al. 2019). Living undocumented creates chronic stress that makes immigrants ill but at the same time denies them access to formal medical care to treat those conditions (Gómez Cervantes and Menjívar 2020). The consequences of legal status on health outcomes are

especially salient for older undocumented immigrants, who generally report poorer health than their documented counterparts (Cheong and Massey 2019). Poorer health outcomes in this group are often associated with a lifetime of back-breaking working conditions (Horton 2016) combined with insecure legal statuses that preclude access to formal health care (Flores Morales 2021). A fragile immigrant legal status also creates housing precarity (Diaz McConnell 2017; Hall and Greenman 2013) and negatively affects homeownership (Diaz McConnell 2015). The impact of legal status on immigrants' earnings has been amply documented (Hall, Greenman, and Farkas 2010; Massey and Gentsch 2014), with evidence suggesting that initial income disparities based on legal status are long lasting (Kreisberg 2019; Villarreal and Tamborini 2018). Research also has extensively documented that legal status, especially in contexts of enforcement collaborations with federal agencies, affects immigrants' (and their families' and communities') willingness to report crime (Dhingra, Kilborn, and Woldemikael 2021; Menjívar and Bejarano 2004; Menjívar et al. 2018). Distrust in police authorities impacts those most vulnerable to crime, like women in domestic violence situations (Amuedo-Dorantes and Arenas-Arroyo 2019), but it also impacts immigrants' sense of belonging, community, and rights (Simmons, Menjívar, and Salerno Valdez 2021).

However, legal status is not a binary; it is constituted by a spectrum of in-between, temporary statuses that span from undocumented to documented (Menjívar 2006; Waters and Pineau 2015), such as TPS and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), among others. The scholarship on temporary statuses underscores the impact that the temporariness of these statuses has on a range of outcomes, demonstrating both the benefits of even a temporary status and the limitations it imposes. For instance, DACA's effects on the education-work association are uneven (Amuedo-Dorantes and Antman 2017; Patler, Hale, and Hamilton 2021); it has enabled some applicants to attend college but discouraged it for others for whom the immediacy of being able to work legally may outweigh the longer term (and uncertain) gains of attending college (Hsin and Ortega 2018). DACA recipients have perceived substantial occupational mobility, but this has not been reflected in movement out of the secondary labor market for many (Hamilton, Patler, and Savinar 2021). Research on the effects of TPS on earnings and occupation shows similar patterns; the temporariness of this status undermines the potential benefits of higher educated TPS holders (Menjívar et al. 2020).

The Value of Frame-Shifting Research on Immigration

Undoubtedly, we have accumulated a voluminous body of work that allows us to understand the intricacies of how legal status works across spheres of life and over the life course, impacting immigrants and their families in enduring fashion. We have shed light on how variations in legal status produce gradated outcomes according to the level of anchoring in society that different legal statuses provide. Importantly, we also understand that legal statuses are produced by law and the classificatory power of the state as governments categorize immigrants into a range of legal statuses (Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014). In my view, our understandings of the effects of legal status seem to be naturally policy-informing even if the aim of the investigation was not necessarily to influence policy. In sum, we have produced a significant body of frame-shifting research but not enough feasibility research in

this area, which would, as DiPrete and Fox-Williams (2021) observe, connect our vast work on inequality to policy-oriented solutions and lend legitimacy to sociological arguments for frame shifting. But because we must first understand the root causes of inequality before moving to proposing strategies to reduce it, I would like to underscore the value that frame-shifting research retains for the potential to apply our sociological knowledge to reduce inequality, despite DiPrete and Fox-Williams's valuable comments and reservations about frame-shifting research. The scholarship on immigration, with its attention to the effects of legal status that naturally generate policy recommendations, exemplifies how frame-shifting research can be a bridge to policy solutions, including proposing modest strategies that could result in transformational changes in the lives of immigrants.

The challenge then, as DiPrete and Fox-Williams (2021) and Nalani, Yoshikawa, and Carter (2021) observe, is to ensure that our research (especially explanatory and frame shifting) is clear and translational beyond our community of scholars. Ensuring the accessibility of our work does not mean diluting it or stripping it of important sociological legibility, but to make it accessible to the entities and actors who decide and design resource distribution policies. In this vein, immigration scholars have been actively communicating research findings by educating policy-makers, institutions, and communities on the detrimental effects of an insecure legal status and of amplified immigration enforcement and pointing to solutions. Nalani et al. (2021) suggest feasible steps to facilitate the delivery of research to policy-makers. I would like to highlight the value of conducting research with input from or in coordination with the communities we research, as I have done in my own work (Menjívar et al. 2020). Thus, the arguments in both *Socius* articles resonate strongly with what we, as immigration scholars, have tried to do to ameliorate the harmful consequences of vulnerable legal statuses in a context of amplified immigration enforcement.

So, what are the possibilities for sociological research to inform policy discussions? This question invites me to reflect on my long-standing interest in what we can or should do with the knowledge we acquire as sociologists. Based on what I have learned since my discussions as a graduate student and speaking as an immigration scholar, I would like to emphasize the importance of considering the sociopolitical context of the specific moment in which we create knowledge and attempt to do public and policy sociology. As Burawoy (2021:208) observes, “political and economic contexts not only limit what policy measures are possible but also shape the outcome of any particular intervention.” This context determines whether and to what extent policy-makers will be receptive to our work, how research will be received, resisted, and interpreted as it enters policy debates. We cannot ignore that even with our best intentions to translate our research, there will be walls we hit and forces against the work we produce, especially the obstacles created by the onslaught of antiintellectualism, misinformation, and antiscience. Thus, as we contemplate what we have done or can do to address the harmful effects of inequalities, we should also consider what we can do to overcome the limitations that sociological research faces when the sociopolitical context is unreceptive to evidence-based work. These considerations undoubtedly reflect my research area, as perhaps at this moment research on immigration, in contrast to research in other subfields, faces particularly severe obstacles to enter policy deliberations. But research on immigration crisscrosses all other areas in which sociologists work (education, health, work), just as other axes of stratification—race, social class, and

gender—would, and thus, an unfavorable sociopolitical climate for research-informed public and policy work will likely reverberate to other areas. Faced with these questions, what is the role of research when we face formidable political constraints? What is possible?

Regarding immigration, given the current political climate, the paralysis we see at the federal level is unsurprising, even if it is this level of government that has plenary power to control immigration, classify immigrants into legal statuses, and manage enforcement strategies. Countless federal-level immigration policies and laws can be reversed,³ some with less effort than others, which could make a vast difference in immigrants' lives immediately and into the future. If the federal level is not amenable at this moment to alter policies based on the research we produce, are there other possibilities to make a difference?

Overcoming Impediments to Policy Influence

These obstacles should not discourage us from conducting policy-relevant research or from making it legible to relevant entities. In fact, the impediments we face should serve as impetus to creatively formulate alternative paths. I see two possible avenues in the area of immigration. The first would be to focus efforts on translating research to lower levels of government (to states and municipalities), show them what has worked, and spell out policies these governments can enact. For instance, there is research agreement on the benefits of driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants and evidence of policy variation across states⁴ regarding health care, access to in-state tuition, and municipal-level efforts to decline participation in federal enforcement programs. There is also variation in these governments' openness to research-informed recommendations. Given states' increase control of some key resource distribution policies, what states and municipalities can do to mitigate the negative effects of insecure legal statuses has huge impact for immigrants.

At the same time, it is legal status, which only the federal government has the power to bestow, that has the long-term, enduring effects to transform legal status into an axis of stratification. The large-scale inequality that legal status produces originates in the power of the federal government, with states and municipalities having leverage to alleviate some of its negative consequences locally. Thus, another important avenue for sociological research to inform policy decisions would be to engage the communities at the center of our research. At the same time we should strive to make our research available and legible to advocacy groups as they work to inform policy-makers of the benefits of legal status for vulnerably legal population (and beyond). These organizations often need rigorous research to sustain their arguments, and sociologists are in a strong position to provide it.⁵ Partnerships with the communities we research—whether they are located locally, nationally, or globally—have the added benefit of strengthening the legitimacy of sociological arguments for frame shifting (see DiPrete and Fox-Williams).

³The Trump administration alone put in place 1,059 immigration-related policies in 4 years, starting a few days after this president's inauguration (<https://immpolicytracking.org/home/>).

⁴There are currently 17 states plus the District of Columbia that allow undocumented immigrants to obtain driver's licenses (<https://www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/states-offering-driver-s-licenses-to-immigrants.aspx>).

⁵I conducted a large, multisite, survey of immigrants on Temporary Protected Status, on which I based a report that organizations use in their campaigns that also resulted in academic publications that organizations highlight as evidence of research rigor (<https://latino.ucla.edu/research/temporary-protected-status/>).

When considering how social science research can enter policy debates and efforts to effect change, it is evident that sociologists are singularly positioned to contribute critical research on inequality reduction; after all, knowledge about various forms of inequality is the sociologists' domain. Through making research legible and available to policy-makers and communities who work on effecting change, we can engage both in policy- and public-relevant work at this critical moment in history.

Biography

Cecilia Menjívar holds the Dorothy L. Meier Chair in Social Equities and is professor of sociology at UCLA. She specializes in immigration, gender, family dynamics, social networks, and broad conceptualizations of violence. She explores the impact of immigration laws and enforcement and various forms of violence on individuals, families, and communities, with a focus on Central American immigrants. Her books include, *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America*, *Enduring Violence: Ladina Women's Lives in Guatemala*, and *Immigrant Families* and the coedited volumes, *Constructing Immigrant "Illegality": Critiques, Experiences, and Responses* and *The Oxford Handbook of Immigration Crises*. She has received career awards from the International Migration Section and the Latino/a Section of the ASA and was awarded a John S. Guggenheim Fellowship and an Andrew Carnegie Fellowship. She served as Vice-President of the American Sociological Association and was elected President in 2020.

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