

Olivia Samples

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Summary: The Social Ties of Immigrant Communities in the US

Four employees from Facebook decided to dive into the question of how well immigrants blend within new communities here in the United States within their article titled “The Social Ties of Immigrant Communities in the United States”. The main goal was to measure the different patterns of integration for immigrant populations, and they chose to do so using data from Facebook. While there have been many research projects geared towards explaining the cause and effects of immigration, these Facebook employees were clear that they are the first to look into this subject at such a microscopic level.

Before we can dive into the Facebook data, we must learn about the main terms used, mostly in Sociology, when talking about this topic: assimilation theory. There are four main types of connections that immigrants can have. *Migrant-local ties* refer to immigrants and US locals being connected, *migrant in-group ties* refer to immigrants from the same country being connected, *migrant inter-group ties* refer to immigrants from different countries being connected, and *transnational ties* refer to immigrants and citizens of other nations being connected. These four main connections can be used to describe many relational patterns.

Now that we understand these terms, the method of the research is clearer. Based on a model designed using census data, the *migrant-local ties* could be measured through an exposure ratio. Similarly, the *migrant in-group ties* were measured through compatriot affinity and the *migrant inter-group ties* were measured through co-immigrant affinity. Each of these represent the ratio of friendship ties of each group (local, same country, different country) compared to total friendship ties. The Facebook employees determined immigrant/local status based on hometowns and current locations specified on Facebook, along with other factors to ensure validity. Using a data set of 10 million people, the results seemed to make a lot of sense. Nearly 90% of friendships on Facebook for immigrants from Germany, the UK, Australia, South Africa, or Canada were composed of US locals. In turn, Mexicans had 60%, Chinese had 42% and Indians had 29%. These results were then applied to further analyses.

There were many insights derived from the continued analysis on this data. First, it can be concluded that the time at which different people groups integrated directly corresponds to their current assimilation status. For instance, Germans integrated in 1985 with an exposure ratio of 90%, while most Indians immigrated around the year 2006 and have an exposure ratio of 29%. In other words, it takes time to make friends out of your comfort zone. Speaking of comfort zone, when coming to a new country with a new language and new culture, people tend to gravitate towards what they know, whether that be other

migrants from their country or from a country similar to theirs. This results in people groups from Asian countries, Latin countries, and European countries gravitating towards each other. There is a social cluster map (Figure 6) within the article that shows these clear migrant inter-group ties. The final factor deals with the distinct geographical location immigrated to. If immigrants move to locations with a strong immigrant community, they have less opportunity to meet people outside of their own country groupings. For instance, most Cubans, while they migrated in 1998, still have a very low exposure ratio because their community is concentrated in southern Florida. Most of these applications make sense, and now we have the data to back them up.

The question now is: is the data valid? The four Facebook employees tried to make sure the data was valid by comparing it to the older model using census data. The data complimented each other; however, I think another precaution they should have made was to only model 75% of the data and then test 25% of it. Despite this critique, most of the other questions that were formed throughout the process were answered in the conclusion. For instance, they admitted that Facebook data is not necessarily representative data for the whole population, so offline data could provide additional accuracy. Also, fake accounts, closeness of friends, and accounts that didn't specify hometown were taken into account as further limitations. Overall, the project was a clear and well thought out window into the patterns of immigrant social ties.