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EVIDENCE –BASED INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION POLICIES¹

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A. THE NEED FOR EVIDENCE - BASED SOCIAL POLICIES

The importance of developing sound and effective policies has been underlined in the social science field (e.g., Zimmerman, 2001). Evidence-based policies refer to policies based on high quality information, which is derived, among other, from research, expert knowledge, and statistics (Nutley & Webb, 2000). To design such policies, one must acquire strong knowledge that should be based on high quality research on the topics of interest. In other words, a clear connection between the scientific community with the policymaking field must be established (Robila, 2012).

Design of such policies can be done by specialists who have multidisciplinary expertise, have a strong research and scientific background, and also a profound understanding of sociopolitical contexts of different regions. Often, such professionals are difficult to identify. In many cases there are very strong scientists with limited policy experience on one side, and policymakers with limited scientific background on the other, rendering the transfer of knowledge between the two groups difficult. Having a multidisciplinary background allows one to have an in-depth and broad understanding of the complex aspects involved in the evidence-based policymaking process and facilitates the collaborations with colleagues in other fields. A profound understanding of the complex field of international migration research should be a scientific base for migration policy development, implementation and assessment.

B. INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION RESEARCH

With the significant growth of an increasingly cultural diverse immigrant population around the globe, becoming culturally competent represents a core duty for policymakers. Working on policies for immigrant population necessitates knowledge about different cultures and people, openness and cultural sensitivity. As such it is extremely important for policymakers to prepare themselves to be culturally competent professionals.

Conducting comprehensive policy-relevant multiple methods and multiple informants research on immigrants is the cornerstone for developing sound migration policies. Yet, the research with international migrants encounters unique methodological challenges such as the different contexts between the host and origin countries or the translation of instruments in different languages. Many immigrants, especially those coming from developing countries are not familiar or comfortable with the research process. As such, they might perceive the research studies with reservation, not being aware of their goals and usefulness. Given this situation, financial incentives provided to research participants might seem particularly attractive to immigrants who might be in need of financial support. Special attention however needs to be provided to ensure that these incentives are not becoming coercive factors that push immigrants to participate in research because of financial need. The American Psychological Association (APA) Code of Ethics indicates that “psychologists make reasonable efforts to avoid offering excessive or inappropriate financial or other inducements for research participation when such inducements are likely to coerce participation” (APA Ethics Code, p.11).

Data collection could also encounter challenges in the research studies with immigrants. Sometimes the data collection involves interviews and recording voices and this method could be particularly challenging for some immigrant groups, especially those coming from oppressive political regimes, such as for example the former communist regime in Eastern European countries (Robila, 2010). Sensitivity, respect and care need to be provided by the professional conducting the study.

Another challenge encountered is the immigrants’ (and especially refugees’) refusal of signing a consent form because of fear of negative repercussion, and thus a practice designed to protect participants can

cause psychological distress due to previous political and social experiences (Pernice, 1994). Another difficulty could be sampling (e.g., random, systematic), since the group might be smaller in size or dispersed (Pernice, 1994).

The APA Ethics Code also indicates that researchers should use “assessment instruments whose validity and reliability have been established for use with members of the population tested” (p.13). However, sometimes this is not possible when assessing immigrant groups due to the lack of instruments tailored for those particular cultural groups.

Even given these challenges, the research on immigration is extremely rich in information especially for large immigrant groups. As such, it should stay at the base of international migration policy making. There have been major advancements in the last two decades in the globalization of the research on immigration. United States has been a premier forum on the international arena in promoting and recognizing the importance of research on international migration (e.g., by conducting national surveys on immigrants, such as the “New Immigrant Survey”).

A systematic study of immigration must also investigate the larger context in which immigration occurs and evolves. For example, migrants are generally not isolated individuals, but part of family systems. Policies organizing migration have significant consequences on all parts of the family system. Therefore, instead of targeting individual international migrants, a more comprehensive approach would be to consider migrant families, since individuals are part of family systems. Previous literature indicated the importance of using a family perspective in migration policymaking (Robila, 2009).

C. EVIDENCE-BASED INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION POLICIES

Developing evidence-based migration policies will not only answer the recommendation of academic and social policymaking fields, but will also assure effective migration policies. With immigration occurring across the world, this is an important phenomenon to tackle.

It is essential for researchers, on one hand, and policymakers on the other, to be aware of the importance of linking the academic and scientific community with the policymaking field and to develop evidence-based policies. At times, there is a gap between these two groups. Researchers need to be aware of the implications of their studies in the policy arena and thus, as they formulate their research questions, they need to make sure that they are substantive and meaningful for policy development. On the other hand, the policymakers need to be open to the suggestions and recommendations that scientists have and to acknowledge the fact that in order for policies to be sound and effective they need to be scientifically based.

Contemporary society cannot be healthy, prosperous and thriving without healthy and happy immigrant families. As such, supporting immigrant families in fulfilling their functions should stay at the basis of the international migration policymaking field in all the countries around the world.

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