

What is integration-assimilation, how do we measure it, and how do we know when it has been achieved?

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Abstract

Integration and assimilation theories explain a process whereby newcomer and majority groups become similar. This paper considers the sociological assimilation theory as a subset of scientific research and asks a set of questions needed to ensure the validity of any such scientific practice. We focus on the theory's outcome concept, measurements, and occurrence requirements. We ask what is assimilation, how do we measure it, and how do we know when it has been attained. We find that, in terms of concept definition, the meaning of assimilation has changed over the past century from ethnoracial passing within a group, to quantified socioeconomic status (SES) mobility leading to passing, and, currently, to SES mobility but without an endpoint. We also find that, in terms of measurement, the variables used to assess assimilation do not emerge out of the theory or data and, as such, vary ad hoc from study to study. Finally, we find that the occurrence or attainment rate has not been theorized. We discuss why the lack of theoretical consistency surrounding the outcome concept, variables, and occurrence rate means that the theory remains provisional. We propose directions by engaging the emerging historical longitudinal data and machine learning language models.

Biographies

Aryan Karimi is Assistant Professor of Sociology at UBC Department of Sociology. In his work, he uses an analytical toolkit consisting of the scientific method (of hypothesizing and falsification) and the genealogical method (of the social construction of knowledge). He brings this critical approach to the study of human migration, race, and sexuality/gender within the context of social theory, policy, and the law. In addition, he has conducted multiple empirical research projects with immigrants/refugees from the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe. He is a faculty member in UBC's Science and Technology Studies program, and the UBC Centre for Migration Studies.

Rima Wilkes is Professor of Sociology at UBC Department of Sociology. Her research considers the relationship between politics and racial and ethnic inequality. She has written on the integration of racial minorities and immigrants in advanced industrial democracies; some of her current research focuses on the causes and consequences of political and social trust. She is interested in the media coverage of immigration and issues of national and geographic border security.