Contextualizing Vocabularies of Motive in International Migration

Chien-Juh Gu, Western Michigan University
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Chien-Juh Gu*

ABSTRACT

Immigrants’ motives are central to understanding immigration, yet they remain an under-researched subject in immigration studies. To fill this gap, this article examines Taiwanese immigrants’ motives for relocating to the United States. Following Mills’ concept of vocabularies of motive, this article treats immigration as situated actions and explores how cumulative causation and structural positions shape immigrants’ interpretations of their immigration decisions. Based on 75 in-depth interviews, this study discovers important differences in motive during two migration phases, initial migration and permanent settlement, as well as differences according to gender, ethnicity, and social class. Migration through education comprises the major pattern of Taiwanese immigration, as most Taiwanese move to the United States to study and then settle there for job opportunities. While men settle for careers, women stay for family wellbeing. One ethnic group, benshengren, tends to settle for job opportunities, while the other, waishengren, migrates to unite their families. Moreover, professionals always consider return as an option, while labourers are determined to stay permanently. Findings of the study suggest the importance of examining the influences of immigration contexts and individual structural positions in shaping personal motives.

INTRODUCTION

“The decision to relocate one’s self, family and community to a new setting and society is one of the most drastic social actions people may take during their lifetime, making motives for migration a worthy topic for study” (Gold, 1997: 410). For both individuals and their families, the process of international migration involves economic, social, and cultural risks. The decision to immigrate is thus a highly important step (Amit and Riss, 2007). Immigration motives are not simply personal perceptions; rather, they implicate many important and meaningful sociological issues such as structural push-pull factors, household economic strategies, gender and family relations, and social networks. Immigration motives provide explanations regarding immigrant groups’ presence in the host society; they also illustrate how immigrants perceive and position themselves in a global era. Regardless of their importance, the social-psychological dimension of immigration remains an under-researched area, and studies of immigrant motives have attracted fairly limited scholarly attention. To fill this gap,
I use a case study of Taiwanese in the United States to examine immigrant motives and their variations shaped by different contexts.

Drawing on C. Wright Mills’ (1940) concept of vocabularies of motive, I perceive immigration as situated actions and discuss how cumulative causation and individual structural positions shape immigrants’ interpretations of their overseas relocation. Data presented in this article are based on 75 in-depth interviews derived from two studies of Taiwanese immigrants in the Chicago metropolitan area. Analyses of the data suggest important influences of social structure and contexts on individual motives.

This article begins with a discussion of relevant concepts and empirical studies, followed by an introduction to Mills’ notion of vocabularies of motive. A review of immigrant motive studies is provided, along with a discussion on major issues in this area of research. I also explain two contextual factors, cumulative causation and individuals’ structural positions, and their potential impacts on immigration motives. Next, I explain the research background, methods, and data upon which this article is based. Following this introduction, I present findings that show motive variations in different contexts of immigration and describe how gender, ethnicity, and social class shape differences in individual interpretations. I conclude by summarizing the research findings and highlighting the important contributions that social-psychological studies can make to enhance scholarly understanding of international migration.

VOCABULARIES OF MOTIVE AND IMMIGRATION

According to C. Wright Mills (1940: 904), motives are “the terms with which interpretation of conduct by social actors proceeds”. Motives are not just reasons, as the different reasons that individuals give for their actions are not themselves without reason. As Mills suggests, vocabularies of motive are “subjective springs of action” (ibid.). Motives are accepted justifications for present, future, or past acts. Groups construct socially acceptable motives for and evaluations of social behaviour and group members learn to describe their behaviour in these terms. Actors’ imputation and avowal of motives are, therefore, social phenomena to be explained.

Mills’ theory provides a theoretical foundation and rationale for examining the social-psychological aspect of immigration. Drawing from Mills, Gold (1997) adopts the concept of “vocabularies of motive” to explain Israeli immigrants’ presence in the United States. He reveals that despite the high naturalization rates of Israelis, many refuse to admit that they will stay permanently in the United States. Most subjects retain a strong identity with Israel and mention that they might return at any moment. Gold argues that when immigrants conceptualize their life in the United States, their vocabularies of motive “have their origins in a group context and may be responses to specific issues and concerns that have important implications for their groups’ identity and status in the host society” (Gold, 1997: 412). Through Israeli immigrants’ vocabularies of motive, Gold reveals the meaning of immigration from the social actors’ stance, thereby enhancing sociological understanding of Israeli immigration.

In recent years, immigrants’ incentives for migration and return have acquired more scholarly attention. For instance, Jensen and Pedersen (2007) examined immigrants’ incentives to leave or to stay in Denmark. They discovered that country of origin, age at entry, education, family ties, and success in the labour market affect immigrants’ decisions to return to their home land, to move to a third country, or to stay in the receiving society. Most notably, immigrants from developed countries tend to leave, whereas those from less developed countries...
tend to stay. In a similar study of international students in the United States, Alberts and Hazen (2005) analysed the factors that affect students’ motivations to return or to stay. They found that professional factors lead to the strongest arguments to stay, because these students believe that the United States provides better opportunities to enhance their careers. In contrast, personal and societal factors significantly support return. Those who hold strong attachments to family ties, networks, and culture in the sending society are more likely to favour return.

In a study of immigrant motives, Murakami (2009) explored why foreign scientists and engineers migrate to Japan. She discovered that the majority of scientists and engineers working in Japan are from other Asian countries; many obtained their doctoral degrees in Japan and began to work after their graduation. Japan’s high level of science and technology, opportunities for acquiring cutting-edge knowledge, and prospects for attaining better performance in an environment with quality facilities, sufficient budgets, and good human resources are the key factors that attract foreign scientists and engineers to settle in the host society. In another study also conducted in Japan, Liu-Farrer (2009) discusses how international education serves as a key channel of labour migration. His research shows that Chinese students in Japan have varying interests, credentials, and motivations for immigration. Because of these students’ diverse backgrounds, they provide Japanese society with both skilled and unskilled labour. In addition, these foreign labourers acquire linguistic, cultural, and social skills through the process of migration. These skills contribute to a transnational economy, helping bring together businesses from China and Japan.

A few studies examine the roles of household strategies and social networks in shaping migrant motives. In their study of South Africa, Gubhaju and Jong (2009) analysed how individuals prioritize goals and how household strategies influence intentions to migrate or to stay; they also examined how gender and marital status affect migration. Their findings suggest that subjects who prioritize their own future hold greater intentions to move than those who place higher importance on the household’s well-being, a trend that is particularly evident among never married men and women. In the long term, however, reducing household risk becomes the primary incentive to relocate for married men and women. Moreover, married men are greatly motivated by the potential for maximizing household income when considering migration in the short term. In a study of North American Jews in Israel, Amit and Riss (2007) explain that while religious incentives appear to be the dominant reason for migration, economic and social considerations are also emphasized as important motives. In the process of decision-making, social networks serve as an important channel for acquiring information about immigration.

All of these studies provide insight for understanding migration incentives and behaviour; they also illuminate the complexity of immigrant motives and the connections between individual thoughts and the larger social structure. Their findings suggest that political and economic push-pull factors between two countries are not the sole factors that generate immigration flows. Rather, individuals take into consideration various factors, some of which are not based on rational calculations or the pursuit of personal goals. These studies also show that immigrants’ motives are greatly related to larger structures such as the labour market, social positions, the welfare system, and the global economy. Motive analyses thus serve as an important channel for understanding the dialectic relations between individuals and structures in the context of immigration. While increasing attention on the social-psychological dimension of immigration is exciting, empirical studies remain scarce; thus, a theoretical framework is needed to enhance scholar knowledge on the subject. To strengthen this area of research, I suggest that four issues should be carefully considered in empirical studies: the different contexts between emigration and settlement; the use of the terms that describe
migration motives; the influence of individuals’ structural positions on motives; and social actors’ interpretations.

First, the context of emigration differs from that of settlement. Emigration describes the action of leaving one’s country to live elsewhere; settlement refers to the establishment of permanent residence in the host society. Although immigration and migration are often used interchangeably and no definition is given, different contexts are referred to in empirical studies. For instance, studies by Gold (1997) and Jensen and Pedersen (2007) examine perceptions of both settlement and return; Murakami (2009) discusses reasons for settlement; Amit and Riss (2007) explore emigration incentives; and Liu-Farrer (2009) explains how international education serves as an emigration instrument. Alberts and Hazen (2005) as well as Gubhaju and De Jong (2009) explore incentives for immigration before actual immigration behaviours occur; the former study examines settlement, while the latter investigates emigration. Since the action of emigration does not always lead to settlement, and intentions to move do not necessarily mean that an action of emigration will follow, it is important to specify and differentiate contexts in which individuals are situated when explaining motives for immigration. In the contemporary global era, where international and transnational mobility is common, it is particularly important to clarify at what point during the process of immigration a motive is discussed in an empirical study. It will also help to understand the factors involved in a decision against a return migration.

Second, several terms have been used to describe migration motives, including motivations, reasons, incentives, and vocabularies of motive. However, they convey somewhat different concepts and implications. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, incentive and motive/motivation are synonyms, referring to something that incites a person to take an action; the term “reason” is “a rational ground,” “an explanation,” or “a sufficient ground of explanation or logical defense.” In contrast, Mills’ theory of vocabularies of motive aims to discover the reason behind a given motive as well as the social contexts in which a reason or motive is explained and justified. In other words, the notion of vocabularies of motive goes beyond a list of reasons that an individual provides; it also addresses how people explain their motives, the process of how a motive is formed, and how individual motives are linked to the larger social structure. This theoretical framework encourages in-depth understanding and sociological imagination, which can serve as a conceptual foundation for contextualizing migration motives.

Third, individuals’ social positions can have a significant impact on their motives, so it is important to examine such influences in empirical studies. Most studies have discussed factors that affect individual incentives for relocation, such as gender, marital status, family ties, country of origin, education, employment, and social networks. These examinations reflect a major sociological tradition that emphasizes social causations in explaining behaviour and social phenomena. They also show that immigrant motives are not simply a collective group phenomenon; rather, motives are shaped by structural and contextual factors. In other words, such analyses reveal the complexity of individual motives, thereby making important contributions to sociological understandings of migration behaviour. Variations within groups and the structural factors that shape variations should continue to be explored in empirical studies.

Fourth, immigrants’ own interpretations should be presented to supplement motive analyses. In contrast to quantitative analyses that sketch causal relationships among variables, individual narratives provide rich, in-depth qualitative data that reveal subjective interpretations, reasoning, justifications, and nuances in response to different contexts. Personal narratives are closer than statistical models to Mills’ concept of vocabularies of motive, which centres around individuals’ explanations of their actions. For instance, two migration reasons that are categorized as the same motive may convey meanings that reflect different contextual
factors. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses are needed to fully understand the similarities and differences across and within groups.

Taking into consideration these four issues, I use Taiwanese immigrants as a case study to explore how vocabularies of motive are influenced by both contexts and structure. I examine two factors, cumulative causation and individuals’ structural positions, that shape individual interpretations of their immigration behaviour. The next sections discuss these factors in more detail.

**Immigration as a social process**

Contemporary international migration is rarely a one-time action or event; rather, it is a developmental social process (Massey, 1986; Castles and Miller, 1998). Once immigration begins, various mechanisms operate to shape the sustainability and perpetuation of international migration. These mechanisms, such as social networks and institutions, may differ from the original causes of migration. Massey (1990) uses the term “cumulative causation” to describe the process of international migration. He argues that over time, “international migration tends to sustain itself in ways that make additional movement progressively more likely” (Massey, 1999: 45). For instance, international migration is a costly and uncertain adventure, especially in its initial stage. Network establishment in the receiving society thus plays an important role in reducing the risks and costs of exploring this journey on one’s own, thereby perpetuating subsequent migration (Massey and España, 1987; Massey, 1990).

For individuals, the immigration process consists of varying phases in which immigrants and their families encounter and respond to different key events over the course of their migrant careers (Massey and España, 1987). Theorizing international migration as a process sheds light on the complexity and dynamic contexts of immigration; it also highlights the dialectic relations between individuals and social structure over time.

When we perceive international migration as a social process, immigrants’ vocabularies of motive should be understood in a dynamic context. As Massey (1999: 45) contends, “each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made”. Immigrants’ motives to settle in a foreign land may vary at different times in the migration process as the social contexts in which their considerations are situated change over time. In a study of Israeli returnees, Tannenbaum (2007) uses ample personal narratives to illuminate the changing contexts, emotions, identities, and perceptions in the process from emigration to return. In their research of North American immigration to Israel, Amit and Riss (2007) show that the decision-making process in migration takes 2 to 10 years, during which various factors come into play. Both studies reveal the dynamic contexts created in the process of international migration and their significant impact on immigration experiences. To capture the changes of social contexts and their influences on individual motives, at least two phases of international migration, emigration and settlement, should be examined. In addition, not all immigrants stay permanently in the receiving societies; some return to their sending societies, while others travel back and forth frequently. Motivations for return migration and transmigration are also important to understand social psychological aspects of international migration.

**Structural positions and immigrant motives**

Variations of motive exist both among and within immigrant groups. Nevertheless, heterogeneity within groups is often neglected in social research. From a social-psychological perspective, an individual’s position in society has important effects on his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Gender, race or ethnicity, social class, and sexuality can influence reasons for
mobility and interpretations of migration experience. Therefore, vocabularies of motive should be examined at both the collective and individual levels. In this article, I use gender, ethnicity, and social class as examples to explore how structural positions shape immigrant motives.

Many scholars have criticized the omission of gender in migration research (see Pedraza, 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, 2003; Foner, 2001, 2005; Pessar, 2003; Curran et al., 2006). Historically, male immigrants have been the major subjects in migration research, while women’s experiences have been neglected or marginalized (Morokvasic, 1984; Gabaccia, 1992; Weinberg, 1992; Pessar, 1999; Kanaiaupuni, 2000). Nevertheless, men and women do not enter migration equally; consequently, they experience immigration differently (Pedraza, 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). For example, whether the woman or the man in a family migrates first depends not only on the economic pull factor in the host society but also on gender relations. Even when the whole family migrates together, a couple’s post-migration employment can reconfigure their gender relations as they adapt to their new socio-economic status in the host society. In other words, immigration creates a unique gendered work-family context that is crucial for understanding immigrants’ lives (Gu, 2009). As international migration is not gender-neutral, examining how gender shapes individual motives is important to reveal the gendered experience of immigration.

Today’s immigrants are tomorrow’s ethnic groups. Therefore, how immigrants are integrated into the larger society has been a major concern in areas of both immigration and ethnicity. However, studies of immigrants’ race and ethnicity often focus on their positions in the host society rather than in the sending society (a few exceptions include Gu, 2006 and Green et al., 2008). Little is known about whether or how an immigrant’s ethnicity in the society of origin affects his or her incentives to move out of the country as well as his or her adaptation experience. The findings of this case study uncover the connections between ethnicity of origin and migration motives.

A great variety exists among immigrant groups in terms of their education, occupation, and income (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). Numerous studies have examined immigrants’ educational attainment, occupational mobility, and economic adaptation, reflecting the core concept of social class in the sociology tradition. Immigrants of different social classes consider various factors in their decision to relocate to another society. In general, immigrant labourers migrate to enhance their economic status and family survival, while professionals migrate to enhance their careers (Alberts and Hazen, 2005; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006; Murakami, 2009). The case of Taiwanese immigrants provides a somewhat different picture along class lines, as motives other than career enhancement and family survival are often interpreted as the primary migration reason for the two social classes, especially in the phase of initial emigration.

In sum, I follow Gold’s approach (1997) to examine Taiwanese immigrants’ motives to comprehend this group’s presence in the United States. Rather than analyzing only individual motives, I distinguish motives at two points of time in the immigration process – initial emigration and permanent settlement – to explore how gender, ethnicity, and social class affect individual interpretations. I believe that the analyses not only supplement Gold’s arguments but also better position individual motives in social contexts. Both immigration phases and structural positions provide important contexts that signify how social actors interpret and evaluate their migration actions in different situations.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND DATA

The data presented in this article are derived from my two studies of Taiwanese Americans in the Chicago metropolitan area from 2001 to 2009. In my first project, 54 in-depth
interviews were conducted with Taiwanese Americans to investigate social and psychological adaptation in the family and work domains (Gu, 2006). Subjects were recruited by multiple methods, including personal networks, snowball sample referrals, and various ethnic-Chinese community organizations and religious groups. A semi-structured interview schedule was used that focused on three major themes: immigration decisions and mental distress, social relations in the family and mental distress, and social relations at workplace and mental distress. Data presented in this article primarily reflect the first theme.

The subjects were asked why they came to the United States in the first place, what their major considerations were to permanently settle in a foreign land, who the primary decision maker was regarding emigration and settlement, whether they had hesitations or psychological struggles in the decision-making process, and how these decisions affected their lives. All interview questions were open-ended; follow-up questions were often asked to encourage detailed descriptions and in-depth interpretations. The interviews ranged from one to four hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview data were analysed using an inductive coding approach as instructed in grounded theory (Strauss, 1987). Four sub-themes emerged when coding the data: decision-maker, decision to migrate, decision to settle, and immigration-related distress. Under each sub-theme, the subjects’ demographic information was compared to examine contrasts resulting from individual structural positions.

In my second project, I used the life-history method (Atkinson, 1998) to examine major changes in gender relations and their impact on immigrant women’s psychological well-being during the process of settlement. I interviewed 21 Taiwanese immigrant women who had lived in the United States for more than 22 years. Their ages ranged from 49 to 63, and they worked in various occupations. Subjects were recruited through various sources, including personal networks, snowball sample referrals, flyers distributed at social events in Taiwanese immigrant communities, and various ethnic-Chinese organizations and religious groups. These interviews, which lasted from 3 to 12 hours over 1 to 3 sessions, documented the women’s life histories and, in particular, major life events and gender-relation changes during different phases of immigration. The interview schedule included all questions asked in the first project, making the two studies compatible. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Combining relevant information from both studies, the findings presented in this article are a mixture of the two datasets, drawing from 75 interviews. The 75 subjects include 37 men and 38 women, whose ages range from 18 to 82. This sample includes two ethnic groups: 52 benshengren and 23 waishengren (see the next section for their explanations). The interviews were conducted in Taiwanese, Mandarin, or English, depending on the subjects’ preference. There were 68 middle-class professionals, and 7 labourers. In spite of the small number of labourers in this study, the results reflect the demographic structure and characteristics of this population, as the Taiwanese is a typical brain drain group of those with high education and high income level (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006: 68). All subjects were US citizens at the time of the interviews. The names used in this article are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

THE CASE OF THE TAIWANESE

The social structure and culture of the sending society has an inevitable impact on immigrants’ worldviews, attitudes, and social practices. To help readers understand the case of Taiwanese immigrants in the United States, I provide a brief introduction to Taiwan’s gender, ethnicity, and class contexts in this section.
Gender relations and ideologies in Taiwan are profoundly influenced by Confucian culture. The cultural aphorism that “men are superior; women subordinate” (nan zhun nu bei) highlights the traditional Taiwanese worldview of gender: men are to exercise ruling power both in public and in private arenas, while women are to be obedient, modest, and quiet. In contemporary Taiwan, improvements in women’s education and social status, growth in women’s participation in the labour market, and a wide diffusion of Western culture and feminist thought have promoted egalitarian ideologies and practices among both men and women (Gu and Gallin, 2004). Nevertheless, as several scholars have observed (Gallin, 1995; Yu, 2001), gender relations on the island remain grounded in traditional cultural norms.

Taiwanese immigrants are composed of two ethnic groups: waishengren, post-1949 Mainland Chinese immigrants to Taiwan, or so-called Mainlanders, and benshengren, pre-1949 Mainland Chinese immigrants to Taiwan. These two ethnic groups differ in terms of spoken language, national identity, political stance, and culture. In general, waishengren speak Mandarin, identify with China, are affiliated with the Kuomintang (KMT, the ruling party in China before 1949 and in Taiwan from 1949 to 2000), and support national unification with Mainland China; in contrast, benshengren speak Taiwanese, identify with Taiwan, are affiliated with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), and support national independence.

Ethnicity in Taiwan must be understood in the context of the complicated historical and political relationship between Taiwan and China. After losing the civil war to the Chinese Communists in 1949, the KMT retreated to Taiwan and brought along many Chinese officials and soldiers. A great number of waishengren dominated government, education, and law enforcement until 2000, when the DPP won the presidential election. Waishengren were a historically advantaged ethnic group on the island. They had better access to political and social resources, because most policies established by the KMT regime were based on their interests. Benshengren were considered a subordinate group, and many considered themselves oppressed under KMT rule. The ethnic differentiation between waishengren and benshengren caused tensions. An incident that occurred on 28 February 1947 was one of the most serious inter-ethnic conflicts in Taiwan’s history. After the arbitrary killing of a benshengren by the police, the benshengren led an angry rebellion, followed by government reprisals. Thousands of benshengren were killed, and the gulf between the benshengren and the waishengren widened. This ethnic tension has become a major push factor of emigration (Ng, 1998).

In addition to KMT’s colonization of Taiwan, the threat of China has always been a major cause of political instability on the island. Consequently, a great number of Taiwanese people began to consider immigration as a viable solution. The impetus to emigrate heightened in 1979, when the United States ended formal relations with Taiwan, terminated the Mutual Defense Act between the two powers, and established diplomatic relations with China. This political change in US policy intensified Taiwanese people’s fears about the island’s security. As a result, many chose to move to the United States (Ng, 1998).

Moreover, before lifting martial law in 1987, overseas benshengren students were under close surveillance by the KMT government. Those who criticized the government were forbidden to return to Taiwan; as a result, many benshengren were forced to settle in the United States. This group of Taiwanese Americans, who tend to have a strong Taiwanese identity, later became an important social force, promoting Taiwan’s independence and international status. In this historical and political context, benshengren and waishengren may have had different reasons to leave the island.

Moreover, Taiwan is one of the Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) in East Asia. The rapid economic growth in Taiwan from 1960s to 1980s created the industrial capitalist class, the middle class, and the working class. Wage workers have increasingly become the major component of the labour force in the past four decades (Hsiao, 1987). Most noticeably, a large portion of Taiwan’s wage workers are non-manual, managerial, and professionals.
Clark and Clark (1993) thus call Taiwan “a middle class society”. Since the 1980s, the income gap between capitalists and the working class has been declining, but the middle class remains stable and continuously growing (Hsaio, 2007). The middle class characteristic of Taiwanese society is also reflected in the demographic components of its overseas populations, as most Taiwanese immigrants in Western societies are professionals.

MOTIVES IN IMMIGRATION CONTEXTS

Taiwanese immigration to the United States follows an “immigration through education” pattern. That is, most Taiwanese immigrants are graduate students when they first migrate to the United States; they settle after securing a job. Taiwanese immigration exemplifies a typical case of cumulative causation, as overseas education leads to immigrants’ settlement. As Liu-Farrer (2009) and Murakami (2009) observed in their studies in Japan, many international students join the labour force of the host society, so international education serves as an important channel of labour migration. Therefore, emigration and settlement should be examined to fully understand Taiwanese immigrants’ vocabularies of motive. In addition, each person occupies different structural positions in society, which may shape individual attitudes, perceptions, and behaviour. For example, a person’s gender, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality may affect their decisions to migrate to another country. The next section demonstrates how immigrants’ vocabularies of motive can vary at different points of immigration and how they are shaped by individual structural positions such as gender and ethnicity.

Individual motives during different phases of immigration

Unlike other immigrants who have clear motives for migration, most Taiwanese immigrants did not plan to permanently settle in the United States. For most Taiwanese, returning home was a presumed step after graduation (Gu, 2006). In particular, many Taiwanese men who went overseas to study left wives back home. For these students, their journey to the United States was temporary. Upon graduation, many sought job opportunities in the United States to gain some work experience before returning to Taiwan; however, once they started working in the United States, their temporary journey of migration became permanent. Below are some interview excerpts revealing why they stayed in the United States:

People don’t usually decide to stay permanently at first, including us. At that time [when I received my Ph.D.], my daughter was one and a half, about two. So, I thought I’d take this job [as an engineer] first. We didn’t think too much. We were young at that time, so we thought we’d work here for a little while and see how it goes. But our intention was not to stay here forever. We are not like Chinese students. They usually want to stay here and never go back to China. Returning to Taiwan is always one of my options.

I did not think of staying here at all at that time. It was totally fate. I came to study. My husband and I were in the same graduate program. We did a lot of research together, and then, later on, we just began to look for jobs together.

Seeking higher education is the primary emigration motive for Taiwanese immigrants. In the sample, nearly two-thirds of the subjects initially came to the United States for educational opportunities. As higher education is one of the privileges of the middle class, it is as important to examine why lower-class Taiwanese chose to move to the United States. Among the seven lower-class participants in this study, five came to unite their families, and one
came to seek better economic opportunities. Most subjects (both middle- and lower-class) did not plan to permanently settle in the United States at first. Becoming Americans was something that “just happened” rather than an intended action. Even after becoming US citizens, many Taiwanese immigrants thought of returning at some point in their lives. Therefore, in order to fully understand Taiwanese immigrants’ presence in the United States, we should distinguish individual motives for initial emigration and permanent settlement.2

When the informants were asked about their primary motives for initial emigration, 46 of 75 subjects stated that they came to pursue higher education; 19 migrated to unite their families; 5 relocated to explore economic opportunities; 3 came to give their children a better educational environment; and 2 left Taiwan because of political instability. In contrast, when asked why they decided to permanently settle in the United States, 36 subjects responded that it was because they found jobs in the United States; 23 stayed for family; 15 stayed to avoid Taiwan’s political uncertainty; and 1 stayed believing that the United States would provide a better living environment. These incongruent motives for initial emigration and permanent settlement reveal different concerns during the two stages of immigration. Such differences illustrate that individual motives are in fact contextual. Below are a number of interview excerpts regarding settlement:

I didn’t have any specific goal at that time. Since I found a job right away [after graduation], I thought I’ll just wait and see.

I earned my Master’s here, in civil engineering. I finished my degree in one year and then started my engineering career right away. It’s already 22 years now. It was very easy to find a job back then [in 1979]. At that time, I did not decide to stay here for good. But since I got a job, I thought I’d work for a while and see how it goes.

My husband found a job right after he received his Master’s degree, so we just stayed here. I did not think of staying here for good at all. I came here to study, but things didn’t turn out the way I expected.

I thought we would return to Taiwan when my husband finished his studies. Then, he found a job right away [after graduation]. So, we decided to stay.

My brother was already here [in the United States] in the ‘80s, so we came to visit him once in a while. I did not think of moving here at that time, but my kids liked America very much. So, we thought we’d come here and see if it’s a good place for us. We lived here for about 10 years around the ‘80s and the ‘90s; then went back to Taiwan and stayed there for nine years. We [my wife and I] liked Taiwan better, but our kids liked America better. So, we decided to move back for the children’s sake. I want to return to Taiwan though after my kids grow up.

From the subjects’ vocabularies of motive, we can see that Taiwanese immigrants’ motives for permanent settlement differ from their motives for initial emigration. Most subjects did not plan to permanently settle in the United States – returning to Taiwan was always an option. Since a great number of Taiwanese immigrants are US-trained professionals, finding a job in the United States was not difficult, because they accumulated social networks, adjusted to the host society, and mastered the language as students. As a result, securing a job became an important incentive when considering permanent settlement.

These findings echo the “education and migration” pattern discussed by Chang (1992), but I argue that “immigration through education” is a better term to describe it. This emphasizes the role of education in stimulating immigration; it also highlights the key force of

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cumulative causation in Taiwanese immigration. Furthermore, the pattern of immigration through education not only reflects the importance of education in establishing Taiwan’s culture of migration but also explains why Taiwanese immigrants are one of the brain drain groups in the United States. Initially emigrating to pursue advanced education, the Taiwanese eventually settled in the United States and merged into middle-class America. More importantly, this pattern is observable among both men and women. In the next section, I will further discuss the gender factor in immigration motives.

**Gender, ethnicity, class, and immigration motives**

Gender, ethnicity, and social class are important structural positions that have important effects on individuals’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Using the same interview data, I examine how individuals of various social positions differ in their interpretations of emigration and settlement reasons. I synthesize major motive differences by gender, ethnicity, and social class.

**Individual motives through a gender lens**

The majority of both male and female subjects first emigrated to study. Taiwanese immigrant women’s higher education and high socio-economic status distinguishes them from other immigrant women who migrate primarily to join their husbands and who work on the lower rungs of the labour-market ladder (see Watts, 1983; Houstoun et al., 1984; Tyree and Donato, 1986). According to 2000 census data, employed Taiwanese immigrant women earned US$ 40,276 in 1999, about US$ 10,000 more than the average earnings for all foreign-born women in the United States (US Bureau of Census, 2003). In other words, both Taiwanese men and women contribute to the middle-class characteristic of this immigrant group. Regardless of the general trend of “migration through education” among both men and women, differences exist between the two genders. Table 1 summarizes these differences.

Variations in motives provide an interesting outlook for further studies that examine gendered motives for immigration and settlement. For instance, while men’s settlement decisions tend to rest on an economic rationale (e.g., job opportunities), women’s settlement decisions tend to rest on non-economic factors (e.g., family reunification). Almost all male informants who initially emigrated for educational opportunities settled for job opportunities; men’s motives were fairly consistent during the two phases of immigration. In contrast, the distributions of women’s motives show greater variations. For example, 11 of the 20 women who came to study stayed because of their jobs; nearly half of these female students settled for non-career reasons. Most female students began to look for jobs after their husbands found work. This trend significantly differs from that among men. In total, over two-thirds of the female subjects settled for reasons unrelated to work, including family reunion, children’s education, political instability in Taiwan, and better living environment in the United States. Marital status might have had an effect on these findings. Most female subjects were single at the time of emigration but married when they considered permanent settlement. Family well-being might have been a factor in their decision to settle in the United States. The following excerpts reveal the gendered context that female subjects faced when considering settlement:

I came to study. I was in a Master’s program of education. Then, I met my husband and got married. Unexpectedly, I was soon pregnant. At that time, my husband had just found a job and become a permanent resident. We didn’t have any relatives here and had to rely on our-
I was only two courses shy from earning my degree, but I had to take care of my child. So, I never finished my study, and it’s still a regret. Life is very unexpected and it does not always turn out the way that you planned.

I came to study. When I applied for the Green Card, it was primarily for convenience, because I needed to work and the money. I did not think of settling in the United States at all. My plan was to return after graduation. Besides, I love my country very much and I never thought of becoming American. But then, I realized that my husband had already decided to stay here permanently. He wanted to stay, and I didn’t mind staying.

Several possible factors contribute to such gender differences in settlement motives. According to some researchers in psychology, traditional sex-role orientations (i.e., masculinity and femininity) shape gendered attitudes. Men tend to be individualist and self-oriented, whereas women tend to be selfless and responsive to others (see Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Wood, 1999). Men are more likely to put their own interests first regarding major decisions such as settlement, whereas women tend to consider other family members’ well-being. It would be a mistake to overlook this psychological distinction, even though its nature and accuracy are debatable. In addition, marital status might have different effects on men and women in their decisions regarding career paths and family relocation.

Furthermore, the fact that most male subjects had job offers immediately after graduation reinforced and legitimatized their desire to stay. It also became a convincing discussion point when persuading their wives to acquiesce to their wishes. Because the husbands had found work, their wives may have thought of other benefits accompanying the settlement decision and reported them as motives. In addition, family reunion remains the second most important motive for both men and women in emigration and settlement, suggesting the strong influence of family well-being. In other words, investing in human capital yields dividends for more than the individual – it also increases the chance that the family will prosper.

Marital status is another key factor that influences Taiwanese immigrants’ considerations of settlement, especially for women. In the study, 31 of the 75 subjects were single at the time of their initial emigration, but almost all were married at the time of their settlement. Among those who were single at the time of emigration, 20 were women. Moreover, 19 of the 20 female subjects moved overseas to pursue advanced education in the United States.
and planned to return after graduation. They later married and decided to permanently settle in the United States when their husbands found jobs there. A few female Taiwanese students were unable to finish their Master's degrees in the United States because of family relocation to another city and child-bearing responsibilities. Thus, married immigrant women appear to be more constrained by their family roles than their male counterparts in the process of settlement. Most of these women's major incentives for settlement centre on family well-being and other non-career considerations such as children’s education and living environment.

In addition, the husband is the primary decision maker regarding permanent settlement and family relocation (Gu, 2006). Even among professional couples who are both US-educated, this pattern remains. Regarding the decision of whether to relocate their families to the United States, approximately 61 per cent of husbands exercised absolute power; 33 per cent of the couples made the decision together. Only 6 per cent of wives were the primary decision-makers regarding settlement. This gendered power structure greatly affects how men and women interpret settlement motives. For most Taiwanese families, the husbands first moved overseas to study and then found a job. The wives, whether in Taiwan or in the United States during the husbands’ US-based studies, usually “had no choice” but to consent to stay. If they opposed settling, the wives would be perceived as the ones splitting up their families. It is therefore understandable that women’s vocabularies of settlement reflect a greater number of non-career factors.

Individual motives and ethnicity

The majority of both benshengren and waishengren subjects initially came to the United States to study. However, the two ethnic groups differ in their other motives for emigration. Benshengren emigrated to seek work, while waishengren moved to reunite their families. These differences suggest that because of their history of migrating from China to Taiwan, waishengren may have perceived Taiwan as a temporary retreat. It is possible that waishengren were more likely to practice chain migration through kinship if they have relations in the United States from the outset. Moreover, some waishengren might have chosen to come to the United States rather than Taiwan after the defeat of KMT, or some might have been caught in the United States during war. When their motives for permanent settlement were compared, benshengren were more likely than waishengren to consider job opportunity as the primary factor for settling in the United States. In fact, job opportunity was the leading settlement motive for most benshengren. In contrast, family reunion was the primary factor in waishengren’s deliberations. Table 2 summaries these differences.

Among various motives, family reunion was a noteworthy reason for waishengren’s emigration and settlement, a trend that was not significant among benshengren. Not much difference was found regarding political factors, but the two groups revealed different political concerns when they identified political instability as the primary motive. Waishengren tended to consider Taiwan as a temporary retreat from the Mainland and perceived both Taiwan and the United States as foreign lands. Fearing the Communists’ threat to the island, they considered the United States as a safer place than Taiwan to settle their families. In contrast, benshengren resented the oppression of the KMT regime and waishengren-dominant governance, considering immigration as an emancipator. They longed for political freedom and human rights when deciding to settle in the United States. However, a few were forbidden to return because of their criticisms of the KMT government in the 1970s. While these different considerations are fairly consistent with the two groups’ positions in Taiwan, a surprising finding emerged from the interviews: three waishengren
revealed that they were oppressed and excluded by *benshengren*, resulting in their decision to migrate to the United States. Below are excerpts from these interviews:

It has something to do with ethnicity. I am *waishengren*. It was very difficult for *waishengren* to find a job at that time in Taiwan [in the 70s and early 80s]… Most job ads in the newspapers were limited to “*benshengren only*” or “Taiwanese speakers.” All types of jobs were like this. Under that kind of atmosphere, I thought it’d be better if we moved to America. We might have better opportunities here. That’s why we moved here. Until today, it’s always a pain in my heart. I really don’t understand why speaking Taiwanese was the requirement of being hired but not your qualifications. After moving to America, I feel I’m emancipated from that ethnic problem.

I worked in the construction industry in Taiwan for two years after college. At that time, you had to speak Taiwanese if you wanted to get a job. We were required to speak Taiwanese at work. But, I am a *waishengren*, and I can’t speak fluent Taiwanese. This is the reason that I moved here. In that situation, you would think, maybe you would have better opportunities overseas than in Taiwan.

This finding is surprising. Historically, the political arena in Taiwan was monopolized by the KMT regime. The officials, soldiers, and supporters that it brought from Mainland China were privileged in society. As a result, *benshengren* were oppressed, and ethnic tension was usually considered the result of *waishengren*’s superiority. Thus, the discrimination that these *waishengren* subjects experienced at work may reflect the larger social structure in Taiwan. As early as the Land Reform (1951-1953), the KMT government compensated *benshengren* landlords whose land was expropriated by giving them bonds in government enterprises. This encouraged many former landlords to move from the rural area to the city where they entered business. In addition, because *waishengren* monopolized the government bureaucracy and education, *benshengren* were forced to go into business and medicine as a path to prosperity. These factors created an economically sectored segregation by ethnicity on the island. As the minority in the economic section, *waishengren* may have encountered structural constraints (such as a glass ceiling) or intentional exclusion by *benshengren*. Moreover, because most businesses in Taiwan were owned by *benshengren* families, they tended to employ kin in high positions, making it difficult for *waishengren* to move up the hierarchical ladder.

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emigration Motives</th>
<th>Benshengren</th>
<th>Waishengren</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>32 (62%)</td>
<td>14 (61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reunion</td>
<td>11 (21%)</td>
<td>8 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Education</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Instability</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (75)</td>
<td>52 (100%)</td>
<td>23 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement Motives</th>
<th>Benshengren</th>
<th>Waishengren</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job Opportunities</td>
<td>28 (54%)</td>
<td>8 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reunion</td>
<td>11 (21%)</td>
<td>12 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Education</td>
<td>6 (11.5%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Instability</td>
<td>6 (11.5%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Environment</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (75)</td>
<td>52 (100%)</td>
<td>23 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
structural constraint was revealed in the subjects’ vocabularies of motive, confirming Mills’ argument that motives are not socially vacant but embedded in structural contexts. Examining how structural positions shape vocabularies of motive thus connects individual psychology to the larger social structure.

**Individual motives and social class**

Despite the small number of lower-class subjects in this study, the major motive for initial emigration of this group was almost identical. Almost all subjects moved for the purpose of family reunion and migrated through family sponsorships. Most of their relatives also worked in the lower ladder of the labour market. The one woman who came to work as a nanny migrated, because she disliked Taiwan’s political environment. Many mentioned that they came to the United States to “see the world outside Taiwan” and perceived living in a foreign country as an opportunity to broaden their vision and to experience a different life world. These subjects started their immigrant life by taking temporary positions in restaurants, childcare, or data entry. Later, they decided to stay permanently when they felt they could survive, because they had relatives nearby, or to give their children a good education. In contrast, most middle-class Taiwanese emigrated to pursue graduate education and settled for job opportunities. Table 3 summaries these differences by social class.

Another major difference between the two social classes is the degree of their determination to settle in the United States. As mentioned earlier, Taiwanese professionals considered return as an option and perceived their settlement as something that “just happened”. In contrast, settlement was a must for lower-class Taiwanese in order to secure a better life for themselves and for the next generation. Due to their disadvantages in the labour market, lower-class immigrants often struggled to survive daily and endured hardship to sustain family well-being. Even so, they were determined to stay. The following excerpts illustrate this experience:

> Every day is a stress. Life is very difficult. I feel that there’s always uncertainty in our life. You don’t know what will happen tomorrow. The stress is very overwhelming. In my own country, I would know how to deal with problems, but it’s very difficult and complicated here. But I think it’s okay as long as you can survive. The United States offers better opportunities for our kids, so we are determined to stay.

**TABLE 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Middle Class</th>
<th>Lower Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emigration Motives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>46 (68%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reunion</td>
<td>14 (21%)</td>
<td>6 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Education</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Instability</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>1 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (75)</td>
<td>68 (100%)</td>
<td>7 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Settlement Motives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Opportunities</td>
<td>31 (46%)</td>
<td>1 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reunion</td>
<td>27 (40%)</td>
<td>3 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Education</td>
<td>5 (7%)</td>
<td>2 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Instability</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
<td>1 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Environment</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (75)</td>
<td>68 (100%)</td>
<td>7 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Life was harsh. I did not have any friends and felt very lonely. During the first ten years, I often experienced racial discrimination at work and changed my jobs many times. I am homesick but I don’t want to return to Taiwan. I have more [political] freedom here.

The best part of the United States is the air. The air is very fresh. The worst thing is that it’s very difficult when you don’t know English. I don’t have a car, so I can’t go anywhere. There are a lot of difficulties in everyday life. Living in the U.S. is very lonely. I wait tables in a Chinese restaurant and earn very little money, but I think overall the United States is a better environment for my children and grandchildren.

Despite the hardship, lower-class subjects considered the United States a better place to live for various reasons. Although acknowledging that return would offer them an easier life, they were determined to stay. Many found sources of support and comfort in religious groups and became devout Christians or Buddhists.

In sum, different settlement phases and individual positions create important social contexts that shape migration motives. Table 4 synthesizes the major patterns of immigration motives among the Taiwanese and variations across gender, ethnicity, and social class. Each factor explains an aspect of migration behaviour; together, they reveal the multifaceted story of Taiwanese immigration to the United States.

CONCLUSION

International migration is a process embedded in various aspects of social life. This article focuses on immigrants’ explanations of their overseas relocation in order to reveal the social-psychological dimension of the immigration process. Through analyses of immigrant’s vocabularies of motive, I demonstrate how context and structure affect individual interpretations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motives</th>
<th>Initial Immigration</th>
<th>Permanent Settlement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Both Men Women</td>
<td>Primarily for Study More for Study More for Family Reunion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Both Benshengren Waishengren</td>
<td>Primarily for Study More for Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Middle Lower</td>
<td>Mostly for Family Reunion Mostly for Study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gu, 2006: 144.
of their immigration reasons. Based on the findings drawn from 75 in-depth interviews, I argue that individual motives are contextual and vary during different phases of immigration. In the case of the Taiwanese, “immigration through education” describes their migration pattern and migration motives. Most Taiwanese immigrants initially came to the United States to pursue advanced studies. They later settled in the host society, often for job opportunities. Regardless of this general pattern, differences exist among sub-groups. For example, men and women differ when interpreting their settlement behaviour. Taiwanese men tend to settle for careers, while women stay for family well-being. Moreover, benshengren tend to settle for job opportunities, while waishengren immigrate to unite their families. Middle-class professionals come to study and then settle for job opportunities, while lower-class subjects migrate through family sponsorship and settle for a better overall environment.

Findings of this study suggest that immigrants’ vocabularies of motive are contextually situated in both the settlement process and the actor’s social positions. This study shows that micro-level analyses of motives can explain an immigrant group’s presence in the host society and reveal connections between individuals and social structures in different contexts. Personal interpretations of migration motives provide abundant data that help to acquire in-depth understanding of the complexity of immigration processes. Therefore, the social-psychological dimension of international migration is worth more scholarly attention and should continue to be explored.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks the reviewers of *International Migration* for their helpful suggestions as well as the generous support of this research by Michigan State University, Western Michigan University, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, and Academia Sinica in Taiwan.

NOTES

1. According to the 2000 Census Data, 93.4 per cent of Taiwanese immigrants are high school graduates, which is the highest rate among all immigrants in the United States. Two-thirds of the Taiwanese aged 16 and over are employed as professionals and managers, and the median Taiwanese household income is US$ 59,612, which is US$ 10,000 more than the median household income for the overall US population (US Census Bureau 2000).

2. In this study, emigration is defined as when the subjects left Taiwan to live in the United States; settlement is defined as when the subjects decided to become US citizens and permanently settle in the United States.

3. Two women married Americans, and the rest married other Taiwanese.

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