Introduction: Economics and Interdisciplinary Approaches in Migration Research
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This special issue explores options for the better integration of economics into interdisciplinary research on migration. Papers include work by economists and other social scientists, showcasing both the extension of economic models to incorporate concepts from other disciplines, as well as work in sociology and political science that draws on economics. Of particular interest are models of networks, social capital and cumulative causation, as well as analyses using the rational actor model outside of economics. We conclude that, while there are substantial benefits to interdisciplinary cooperation, economists tend to resist full integration, preferring to incorporate insights and concepts from other social sciences without revising their core theoretical tenets, especially the commitment to utility-maximising agents. Nonetheless, dialogue between the disciplines can encourage researchers to clarify and refine their chosen research approach. Moreover, the co-existence of diverse approaches to social explanation produces a far richer and more variegated body of knowledge on migration.

Keywords: Migration; Economics of Migration; Interdisciplinary Research; Migrant Networks

Scholars of international migration have proved themselves adept at integrating different disciplinary approaches. This aptitude has been indispensable in attempts to understand the causes of migration, in describing patterns of migration and immigrant integration in host countries, and in explaining policy responses to migration. Yet migration research in economics has tended to remain distanced from
the other social sciences, adopting approaches developed outside of economics only
in a piecemeal way. Certainly, economics has appropriated a number of concepts
from sociology and political science, many of which have been integrated into the
‘new economics of migration’ and new institutionalism; and it has exported other
concepts such as ‘human capital’. But it has seldom entered the interdisciplinary
dialogue in a meaningful way. 2

This isolation of economic research from the other social sciences has prevented
sociologists, geographers and political scientists from recognising and capitalising on
the advantages of economic analysis: namely, the discipline’s ability to formalise
arguments and develop stylised models; and its capacity to test hypotheses using
econometric techniques. These two properties make economics uniquely positioned
to contribute to theory-building. The discipline’s clarity of explanation and its
predictive capacity also make it extremely useful for policy-oriented research and
policy planning.

For their part, economists have not been able to profit fully from the richness of
theoretical and empirical analyses produced by the other disciplines. Even economists
recognise that there is often a substantial gap between the idealised models they have
developed and the empirical phenomena they seek to explain.

This special issue explores options for better integrating economics into
interdisciplinary research on migration, and critically assesses attempts to date. 3 It
addresses four central sets of issues:

1. Why has economics remained relatively screened from interdisciplinary exchange
   in migration research? Is there a necessary trade-off between theoretical rigour
   and models that do justice to social complexity? What do economists and other
   social scientists have to gain from interdisciplinary research?

2. What forms could such interdisciplinary research take? Will the greatest gains
   occur when theories, concepts and methodologies are borrowed or imported, but
   without challenging the basic theoretical and methodological structure of each
discipline? Or do we see benefits from full methodological integration, even if
   models may need to sacrifice something in coherence or robustness?

3. What sorts of application of interdisciplinary approaches to migration theory
   exist? How should we evaluate them? Economic models of networks, social capital
   and cumulative causation constitute an arena in which interdisciplinary concepts
   are clearly central. Within sociology and political science, the use of rational actor
   models involves the adoption of one of the core assumptions of economic
   models.

4. What can economic models and methodologies contribute to policy planning and
   evaluation in the areas of labour migration policies, integration and citizenship?

The papers in this volume consider the theoretical and methodological issues in
integrating approaches from economics into interdisciplinary research; and they
provide examples of the application of such approaches in migration research. The
range of application covers theories of international migration, integration, and migration policy. The papers demonstrate many of the advantages for social science of incorporating economics approaches, in particular the opportunities for developing more rigorous theories and better-elaborated policy simulations. They also illustrate the benefits for economists of incorporating insights from other disciplines, in terms of enabling them to recognize a broader class of explanations than current economic models allow for. On a less optimistic note, some of the papers also alert us to the risk that the resulting analysis may fall between two stools, foregoing both the theoretical rigour of existing economic models and the richness of explanation proffered by the other social sciences.

The special issue includes contributions from economists, sociologists and political scientists. Each has made use of theories, concepts or methodologies from economics, but in rather different ways. The economists have generally applied econometric methods to model or test hypotheses on the causes or impacts of migration. In keeping with the interdisciplinary focus of the issue, however, the onus of their analysis is on social aspects that are often ignored or considered tangential to the market economy. Thus one paper seeks to model and test the role of social ties in influencing the scale and destination choices of migrants (Gil S. Epstein), while a second explores how school systems and classmates affect the performance of immigrant children (Horst Entorf and Martina Lauk). A third paper examines the determinants of decisions to acquire citizenship in Canada (Don J. DeVoretz). The sociologists and political scientists, meanwhile, have made use of concepts and theories borrowed from economics to help explain migration phenomena. Thus Sonja Haug applies rational choice theory to explain migration decisions, and Peter Nannestad, Gunnar Lind Haase Svendsen and Gert Tinggaard Svendsen use concepts of social capital to help explain patterns of immigrant integration.

Three of the papers focus explicitly on the relations between the disciplines, examining interdisciplinary work in more conceptual terms, considering research to date and possibilities for future development. Dragos Radu addresses these issues from the viewpoint of the economist, arguing that current economic models have incorporated many of the insights of the other social sciences. By contrast, Christina Boswell expresses doubts that current attempts in economics to model social dynamics adequately capture sociological insights. Gary P. Freeman and Alan E. Kessler provide a similar analysis from the viewpoint of political science, offering a broad overview of how economic analysis contributes to the political scientist’s understanding of migration policy.

**Contributions in this Volume**

While these alternative approaches to incorporating economics are important to note, we chose to arrange the papers in this issue according to themes in migration research, rather than disciplinary perspectives. Migration research encompasses a broad range of topics, and we have divided the contributions into three main themes:
causes and patterns of migration flows, dynamics of immigrant integration, and public policy responses to these phenomena. We believe that these are areas that provide both substantial challenges and important opportunities for interdisciplinary research.

The first two papers, by Radu and Boswell, provide an introduction to the central issues in the volume. Radu offers an account of how economic models have developed and extended their analyses to recognise the role of social interactions in migration choices. Contrary to the dominant view, he suggests that non-market interactions have been incorporated into existing models, not merely as appendages but as central elements in the decision-making process. He argues that the conventional model, which only recognises pecuniary incentives and observable markets, is a simplification that has never served as the conceptual basis for migration models in economics. The need to recognise that psychological costs play a central role can be traced back to the earliest economic models, and formalisation of these ideas dates at least to the development of human-capital-based views of migration in the 1960s. He observes a natural progression of models, attempting to capture more complex social phenomena outside conventional markets: to wit, considering the role in migrant decisions of heterogeneous preferences, preferences for non-monetary attributes, the family, and networks. Further interdisciplinary research, he suggests, must be built on a recognition of the developments that have occurred to date.

Boswell is more sceptical about the extent to which economic models can capture the complexity of social action. She argues that neoclassical accounts are firmly committed to claims about methodological individualism; and that the elegance of their theoretical structure depends on their capacity to make generalisable (and thus predictive) claims about human action. The problem is that these claims cannot square with sociological insights about the role of socially mediated norms in influencing behaviour. However, this does not mean that there is no role for economics in interdisciplinary migration research; rather, she argues that attempts to model behaviour must be worked up from detailed observation of specific social groups, rather than inferred from general assumptions about utility maximisation and rationality.

After sketching the broad contours of the debate, we move on to the first substantive issue of migration flows. Within this theme, we have selected two papers that deal with the determinants of migration from the perspective of the role of migrant networks in decision-making. This focus provides a good illustration of both the opportunities and constraints of economics approaches. Economists have traditionally been prominent in the literature on migration theory, advancing macro and micro theories of the determinants of economically motivated migration. But such theories have been criticised for ignoring the relevance of the ‘meso’ level, namely the role of migrant networks and social capital in influencing migration decisions (Faist 2000). This theme therefore offers a good case for testing the potential for interdisciplinary integration.
Epstein’s paper on herds and networks as two models of decision-making offers an excellent example of how economics has attempted to model these meso dynamics. Epstein and his colleagues have been at the forefront of research in this area (Bauer et al. 2002), and in this paper he sets out the main assumptions of both models of decision-making. Networks affect decisions by altering the costs and benefits of a particular destination choice, both by providing information and by facilitating adjustment to a new location. Individuals will have incentives to move to a destination where there is an existing network; but once networks reach a certain size, competition for jobs and other resources causes the attractiveness of this destination to decrease. In contrast, herd effects occur when individuals observe others’ behaviour, often disregarding information they may have about the destination. Herd effects therefore imply that migration decisions will be less responsive to changes in the relative benefits of different destinations, and migration flows may continue to a particular place even when more desirable locations are available. As Epstein emphasises, these models assume that migrants are individually rational in their decisions, and so underscore the point that it may not be necessary to relax the assumption of rational actors to identify what may appear to be paradoxical behaviour.

Haug is a sociologist who has made extensive use of rational choice theory in her work. As she points out, it is a theory that is clearly informed by economics and benefits from the theoretical elegance of that approach. Above all, it allows one to develop generalisable claims about individual decision-making. However, much of the content of the preferences incorporated into the rational choice approach may be derived from sociological insights about the nature and significance of social and familial ties. Thus her review of the relevant literature also underscores the sociological contribution to this analysis. Even if economists do attempt to incorporate the role of demographic characteristics, or the relevance of social ties, it is sociologists who have identified the character of these relationships and explicated their underlying social structure. Haug illustrates the empirical importance of family migration based on surveys of migration intentions in Bulgaria and of Italian immigrants in Germany.

The second theme of immigrant integration represents a more fragmented field of research, traditionally dominated by sociologists and political theorists. The relatively few forays by economists into the field tend to involve assessments of the level of immigrant assimilation into a particular host country, usually based on labour market indicators. But concepts drawn from economics have much more to offer, as illustrated in the paper by Nannestad, Svendsen and Svendsen. These authors examine the process of immigrant integration in terms of the accumulation of ‘social capital’—a concept with mixed parentage but with important roots in economics. They consider the relationship between ‘bonding’ social capital, connoting ties within an ethnic community, and ‘bridging’ social capital, which enables ethnic groups to develop trust relations with members of the dominant host society. They pose the question as to whether these two forms of capital compete or
support one another—another way of conceptualising the ongoing debate in the migration literature about whether intra-ethnic bonds hinder or facilitate immigrant integration. The somewhat surprising conclusion is that these forms of social capital appear to complement one another, at the level of both the individual and the ethnic group.

Entorf and Lauk also look at impacts of social interactions on migrant integration, but their focus is on the school achievement of the children of immigrants. Based on an analysis that considers peer effects in school test performance, they investigate how structural differences in the educational systems of different host countries affect test performance of children with immigrant backgrounds. Their analysis suggests that, in those countries where schools are strictly segregated by ability at an early age, immigrants suffer a decrement in relative performance which magnifies their initial disadvantages. The paper offers an excellent example of how multivariate analysis can be used to elucidate and quantify the role of social structure in influencing paths of immigrant integration.

The third theme addresses questions of public policy responses to immigration—what we broadly term ‘migration and the state’. Building on Freeman’s (1995) seminal article on the political economy of migration policy, Freeman and Kessler provide an extensive outline of how ideas from economics can be joined with those of political science to develop a political economy of immigration policy. In contrast to the focus on social mechanisms that dominates most of the other contributions, the paper emphasises market processes that are the primary focus of conventional economics. Their work shows that, even within this much narrower domain, there remain extensive opportunities for developing new theoretical and empirical approaches to the study of immigration policy. They offer a rich and exciting agenda for future research into the political economy of migration.

The second paper in this section, by DeVoretz, straddles the two themes of immigrant integration and migration policy responses, addressing the question of the determinants of decisions to acquire citizenship. The current literature, DeVoretz argues, tends to be fragmented and ad hoc, failing to integrate the analysis of decisions to naturalise and the consequences of naturalisation. He suggests that economics provides a good framework for integrating the two, through its mechanisms of feedback effects. The paper substantiates this integrated theory of citizenship acquisition by drawing on data on ascension to Canadian citizenship. DeVoretz makes a cogent case for interdisciplinary research within this framework, although he makes it explicit that such a programme will be contingent on the acceptance of a basic tenet of neoclassical economics, the assumption of a utility-maximising individual.

Discussion

This selection of papers cannot hope to provide exhaustive coverage of the many ways in which economics can contribute to interdisciplinary research in migration.
However, we hope that these papers at least offer a sample, perhaps even a ‘showcase’, of what economics has to offer. We believe that they provide a powerful intellectual case for engagement between the disciplines. The papers provide ample examples of how concepts and theories from economics have informed social scientific research (rational choice, social capital, political economy). And they show how research within economics can and has made impressive efforts to model social action (herds, networks, social multipliers, feedback effects).

Nonetheless, it would be naïve to believe that we are observing a clear trend toward the integration of economics and other disciplines in migration studies, or that existing efforts are without their difficulties. Rather, we believe that where economists and others interact there will often be friction and disagreement, not only as to how best to address those problems that are generally recognised, but even with regard to which problems are worth pursuing. Opinions about the nature and source of these impediments are likely to vary depending on one’s disciplinary perspective.

From the point of view of economists, there is a general confidence that their discipline approaches problems in ways that are inherently more useful than those of other social scientists. Over the past few decades, economists have moved into areas historically outside their domain, in a process that has been dubbed ‘economic imperialism’. Lazear (2000) provides a detailed argument that this reflects the basic superiority of economics over the other social sciences. ‘Economics has been successful because, above all, economics is a science’, concludes Lazear (2000: 141). Although Lazear concedes that ‘much can be learned from other social scientists who observe phenomena that we often overlook’, and that ‘broader-thinking sociologists, anthropologists, and perhaps psychologists may be better at identifying issues’, he quickly adds that other social scientists are ‘worse at providing answers’.

Albeit in less extreme form, Radu’s contribution to the current volume contains hints of this view. He points out that the concepts of personal networks and social structure have, in fact, been incorporated into economic models. Critics of economic analysis who stress the importance of non-market factors have failed to recognise the very general structure of economic models and the implicit role that non-market interactions and personal preferences play in them. His position is that the long-standing framework used in economists’ studies of migration is dynamic and potent; other social scientists have not proposed a meaningful challenge.

In the face of such views, attempts to question the economic approach, like that put forth by Boswell, are unlikely to be accepted by economists. Most economists would dissent with Boswell’s assertion that their assumptions about rationality and utility maximisation ‘become untenable in the case of migration decision-making’. They would contend that, complex as migration decisions may be, they entail purposeful action no less than standard consumption choices. Furthermore, given the long list of non-market behaviours where economic models now have been fruitfully applied—e.g. marriage, drug addiction, religion—there is little reason to believe that migration justifies special treatment.
Among the economists contributing to this volume, DeVoretz exemplifies this approach. He is explicit in stating that interdisciplinary work involving economists will have to accept the assumption of the maximising individual. His own model posits a migrant who weighs the costs and benefits of citizenship. Similarly, Epstein simply assumes individual maximisation. The migrant who follows existing migration flows (i.e. follows the ‘herd’), or who moves towards areas settled by earlier migrants (responding to networks), is making rational self-interested choices in the face of poor information and the valuable support that networks offer.

Although an apparent faith in rationality may be a defining feature of much economics, it is important to recognise that rationality is not foreign to analyses outside of economics. There are many social scientists outside of economics who would embrace the concept of the utility-maximising individual as the basic building block for social explanation. Haug’s contribution to this volume reminds us that for many decades rational choice theory has applied these assumptions within sociology. Whereas social networks are central in the literature she draws on, there is no challenge to the underlying assumption that individuals are making rational—or at least intendedly rational—choices. For sociologists like Haug, then, the economists’ refusal to abandon assumptions of rationality need not be an impediment to cooperation.

But for those sociologists and political scientists who are more sceptical about rational choice approaches, what options remain for working with economists? One route suggested by some of the contributions to this volume is to focus on those elements of economic analysis that are concerned with measuring and modelling correlations between social phenomena, which investigate social structures without placing emphasis on the decision-making process. The papers in this volume focusing on immigrant integration—one written by economists and the other by political scientists—examine the character of migrants’ social relations and institutions without taking a stand on the aetiology of individual behaviour. Entorf and Lauk are concerned with how institutional features of school systems interact with social processes to affect test achievement by immigrant children. Here, the defining contribution of economic analysis is the sophisticated use of quantitative models, many developed by economists, to capture interactions between group and individual behaviours. Little is said, or needs to be said, about the rationality of the students or their parents. The analysis of Nannestad et al., which addresses the question of social capital, is primarily concerned with the character of social networks—quite independent of the detailed factors and processes underlying individual decisions. So the application of economics methodologies to structure rather than to explain individual behaviour is less problematic for sceptics of rational choice accounts.

A second possibility is to focus efforts on social questions in environments where economists’ assumptions are less contentious. Freeman and Kessler show that, even restricted to its traditional area of concern (market transactions and material gain), economics has a great deal to contribute to the study of migration policy. Although
their analysis suggests that incorporating economics and political science into a seamless analysis of migration policy is not without its difficulties, the gap in approach that needs to be overcome is relatively modest. It is clear that there is room for useful interplay, a sharing of ideas at this margin. Of course, whether this more restricted scope of application is acceptable to Lazear’s ‘economic imperialists’ is open to doubt.

In fact, we suspect that the most common form of interdisciplinary cooperation in future research is likely to be less ambitious: it will involve the continued appropriation of non-economics issues and concepts by economic theory. On this account, other disciplines will by and large be relegated to supplying economists with empirical observations and concepts that aid the economist in pursuing the ‘true science’ of explaining and predicting behaviour. But the broader theories of social action developed in the other social sciences—especially those that question central economic assumptions—are likely to be disregarded. Where economists do adopt others’ concepts, they are likely to do so, as Boswell puts it in her contribution to this special issue, ‘very much on terms of neoclassical economics’. If so, it is clear that there is little hope that true interdisciplinary integration will grow and flourish. In fact, we suspect that, in migration work as elsewhere, economics will continue to develop according to a logic that only its practitioners truly appreciate. The gap between the formal, idealised models of economists and the view of migration espoused by other social scientists may very well remain or even grow. Economists will undoubtedly remain confident in the superiority of their approach.

But the abandonment of a more ambitious goal of interdisciplinary integration need not imply the dearth of interdisciplinary engagement. To date, the social phenomena that economists choose as the focus of their models were in many cases initially identified by other social scientists. As Radu notes, although the role of networks in migration has a long history, Douglas Massey, a sociologist, was central in undertaking the empirical analysis that allowed this topic to gain research attention. The complexity of modern economic models of migration, for example as represented by Epstein (in this issue), owes much to social scientists outside economics.

Concepts determine the kinds of data that are gathered and attended to. Because of their focus on aggregate relationships (e.g. ‘social facts’), social scientists outside of economics are often in a better position to identify the relationships and patterns in migration data. An extensive and arid literature in economics extending through the 1980s provided various ‘tests’ of whether individuals migrated to areas with greater earnings and lower unemployment, attempting to illustrate this particularly simple conclusion of the standard economic model. The extension and development of more interesting economic models that went beyond this simple prediction was undoubtedly spurred by the challenge posed by other disciplines. Even when the economist does not acknowledge the contribution, the role of outside pressure—or competition—may be central.
As a final thought, it is worth stressing the advantages of retaining diversity of different approaches to social explanation. In her paper, Boswell refers to the notion of ‘complementary articulation’: the idea that different theories and methodologies can shed light on complementary aspects of the same social phenomena. She suggests that qualitative data analysis focusing on individuals in small reference groups could be used to trace and understand how decisions are made in their group context. Such analyses could complement quantitative studies of decision-making drawing on wider samples. Our view is that the goal should be to develop alternatives that can provide competing explanations, contributing to a richer and more diverse set of theories for explaining the same phenomena.

Even where such interdisciplinary exchange simply re-confirms economists in their commitment to their own research methods, the exercise of clarifying and justifying their models to other social scientists can in itself be a source of enrichment. The same holds for sociologists and political scientists engaging with economic approaches. Such exchanges can generate more thoughtful and insightful research within the respective disciplines, even if they cannot always achieve full disciplinary integration.

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Notes

[1] For discussions of such interdisciplinary work, see Brettell and Hollifield (2000); also Bommes and Morawska (2005).
[2] Modern economic analysis is no longer limited to conventional markets, and so a substantial economic literature is focused on questions that were previously the purview of sociologists and anthropologists. While such ‘economic imperialism’ has extended the use of concepts from other disciplines in economic models, this cooptation is often carried out in such a way that it loses much of the core meaning of concepts, at least as viewed by the discipline in which they were originally developed.
[3] Most of the papers were prepared for and discussed at a workshop hosted by the Migration Research Group at the Hamburg Institute of International Economics, 13 June 2005. The contributors comprise a mixture of leading and well-established figures in the field, and younger researchers working on cutting-edge themes.
[4] One of us is a contributor to and adamant defender of this style of economic analysis.
References


