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Immigrant Victimization: Centering Language in Theory, Data and Method

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Abstract: Compared to immigrant criminality, relatively less attention is paid to immigrant victimization, even as extensive scholarship on criminal victimization exists more generally. This is curious in light of research showing that certain immigrant groups are at increased risk of victimization with respect to certain crimes. In this essay, we set out to answer the following questions: How do leading theories of victimization explain the risk of immigrant victimization? Are there aspects of immigrant victimization that would benefit from further theorization and empirical inquiry? How do challenges associated with data collection of immigrant populations impact the advancement of theorizing and research on immigrant victimization? What insights about immigrant victimization may be gained by better integrating theory, data, and method in this research area? To answer these questions, we first provide an overview of classic frameworks used to explain criminal victimization in general, mapping their development to broader discussions in victimology. We then review how victimization theories are used to explain immigrant victimization, discuss the possibility of using culturally integrated theories of offending in immigrant victimization research, and examine data impediments associated with studying immigrant crime victims. With an aim toward integrating theory, data, and method in this research area, we next propose that scholars center language in research on immigrant victimization, offering examples of where such an approach could yield important theoretical and empirical advancements. We conclude by identifying policies and practices that are consistent with this approach.

Keywords: immigrant; victimization; theory; data; language

Immigrants have long been the backbone of communities across the U.S. Few other times in history, however, have seen such a significant immigrant presence in American society. According to recent estimates, the foreign-born now account for approximately 14.6 percent of the U.S. population [1], which is just slightly below the all-time high record reached in 1890 [2]. There is great heterogeneity within the foreign-born population, with approximately half of all immigrants in the U.S. originating from Latin America (half of the Latin American foreign-born population having migrated from Mexico), a little more than a quarter from Asia, about nine percent from Europe, and about eight percent from either Africa, Oceania, Northern America, or Born at Sea [1]. Within each of these groups are immigrants from different countries, with different cultures, languages, immigration experiences, and more. Given this rich history, there has long been an interest in understanding how immigrants shape all aspects of American society—including how immigrants impact crime and public safety.

Consistent with this interest, scholars have published extensively on immigrant criminality and the immigration–crime relationship. Several conclusions emerge from this body of work. First, immigrants are generally less crime-prone than their native-born counterparts. At the same time, research shows that the individual-level link between immigrants and crime appears to wane across generations as the children of immigrants born in the U.S. exhibit higher offending rates than their parents. Research also shows that assimilated immigrants have higher rates of criminal involvement compared to unassimilated

immigrants. Finally, research reveals that areas with greater concentrations of immigrants tend to have lower rates of crime and violence, all else being equal (see [3] for an extensive review of studies supporting these conclusions). There now exists a substantial body of research on the immigration–crime nexus.

Comparatively speaking, much less attention has been paid to the study of immigrant victimization [4] (p. 441). While extensive scholarship on criminal victimization exists more generally, with few exceptions (e.g., [4–10]), researchers rarely focus on the victimization experiences of immigrants. This is curious in light of research showing that certain immigrant groups are at increased risk of victimization with respect to certain crimes including homicide [11], intimate partner violence [12], sexual assault [13], gang violence [14], and wage theft and robbery [4,15]. Research also finds that immigrants tend to underreport their victimization experiences for many reasons, including fear of being deported, embarrassment to family, shame, language barriers, lack of knowledge of the criminal justice system, distrust of the system, fear of retaliation, lost wages, unresponsiveness of officials to immigrants' concerns, and lack of transportation [14,16]. These social facts affirm the need for increased scholarly attention to immigrant victimization, including its theoretical underpinnings and empirical realities.

In this essay, we set out to answer the following questions: How do leading theories of victimization explain the risk of immigrant victimization? Are there aspects of immigrant victimization that would benefit from further theorization and empirical inquiry? How do challenges associated with data collection of immigrant populations impact the advancement of theorizing and research on immigrant victimization? What insights about immigrant victimization may be gained by better integrating theory, data, and method in this research area?

To answer these questions, we first provide an overview of classic frameworks used to explain criminal victimization in general, mapping their development to broader discussions in victimology. We then review how victimization theories are used to explain immigrant victimization, discuss the possibility of using culturally integrated theories of offending in immigrant victimization research, and examine data impediments associated with studying immigrant victims of crime. With an aim toward integrating theory, data, and method in this research area, we next propose that scholars center language in research on immigrant victimization, offering examples of where such an approach could yield important theoretical and empirical advancements. We conclude by identifying policies and practices that are consistent with this approach. While there is a growing body of work on immigrant victimization in other countries (e.g., [17–19]), we focus on research that evaluates immigrant victimization in the U.S. At the same time, given the trends described above, our discussion accounts for the fact that the term "immigrant" is a rich concept that reflects the diverse reality of what it means to be foreign-born in the U.S.

1. Immigrant Victimization: Essential Context

The study of victimization has become a vibrant part of the criminological enterprise. The past few years alone underscore this trend, with annual reviews published on victimization trends and correlates [20], victims' decisions to report victimization [21], and the significance of the victim–offender overlap [22], as well as volumes dedicated to advancing victimization research and theory (e.g., [23–26]).

This attention, however, has not settled the longstanding question of whether victimology should be considered a standalone discipline or a subfield of criminology. At the core of this unresolved debate is a blurred boundary between victim and offender. Von Hentig [27], "the father of victimology," maintained that victimology is a part of criminology, as the victim–offender relationship reflects the symbiotic nature of the two areas of inquiry. Mendelsohn [28], in contrast, argued that victimology is separate from criminology and should be regarded as "a science parallel to it" (p. 26). As the field developed, scholars raised questions about the scientific nature of victimology. O'Connell [29] argued, for example, that while "victimology has not yet developed into a science," as it does, "victimology's

objective should be the development of a body of general and verified principles regarding the causes and prevention of victimization, the victimization process, the effects of victimization, and the efficacy of treatment for such effects" (p. 101). To develop such principles, it is necessary to advance and test theories of victimization, refine data collection efforts, and evaluate how both can be improved to better explain victimization risk. Nowhere is this needed more than with respect to the study of immigrant victimization.

Scholars describe how the criminal justice system fails to protect certain groups or members of society from victimization, including immigrants [30], but on the whole, far too little research explicitly seeks to understand their risk factors for victimization. Even though immigrants were identified as a class of crime victims in the 1940s [27], research on immigrant victimization did not begin to develop until the 1990s. Most early research focused on identifying correlates and causes of fear of crime (e.g., [31–33]), sources of reluctance to report victimization (e.g., [14,16,34]), and perceptions of law enforcement (e.g., [35–37]). As interest grew, researchers called for an "immigrants as victims framework" [38] and began analyzing immigrant victimization by crime type, such as property and violent crime (e.g., [10,39,40]), homicide (e.g., [41,42], hate crime (e.g., [43,44]), and crimes for which immigrants are particularly vulnerable, such as human trafficking (e.g., [45]) and the exploitation of domestic workers and day laborers (e.g., [46,47]). This body of work suggests that victimization rates among immigrants differ by crime type.

2. Immigrant Victimization: Theoretical Considerations

Academic attention to crime victims dates as far back as the mid-eighteenth century, but began in earnest in the mid-twentieth century, when Benjamin Mendelsohn [48] and Hans von Hentig [49] began empirically exploring the relationship between offenders and victims. This work led to the development of crime models that, for the first time, included both offenders and victims. Their research helped shape the first theory of victimization, victim precipitation [50], which dominated victimology for more than three decades. Two additional theories, developed in the 1970s, have since saturated victimization research: lifestyle theory [51] and *routine activities theory* [52]. We briefly review these theoretical contributions and connect them to broader discussions of victimization research. We then introduce a fruitful theoretical approach to studying immigrant victimization that incorporates the role of culture.

A Field in Progress: The Development of Victimization Theories

Foundational works in victimology are generally descriptive and often suggest that victims of crime play a role in their own victimization. In his early work, von Hentig [50] reflected on the "mutuality in the connection of perpetrator and victim, killer and killed, duper and dupe" (p. 303). Von Hentig [27] later asserted that some victims provoke victimization through manifest expressions of wishes, attitudes, and personalities. Interested in victim-risk, he developed general classes of crime victims based on psychological, social, and biological risk factors. He also described the characteristics associated with these factors that increased vulnerability to crime. An immigrant, von Hentig explained, is more likely to be victimized because of their marginalized social status. Mendelsohn [53] also proposed a victim typology by way of a culpability spectrum that included five levels of victim culpability, ranging from completely innocent (i.e., did not contribute to their victimization) to most guilty (i.e., was the instigator—e.g., killed in an act of self-defense). Building on the work of Mendelsohn and von Hentig, Wolfgang [50,54] developed the idea of "victim precipitation" in his study of homicides in Philadelphia. Of the 558 cases examined between 1948 and 1952, he identified 150 (26 percent) as victim precipitated (i.e., "the victim was the first to show and use a deadly weapon, to strike a blow in an altercation") [54] (p. 2). Wolfgang [54] concluded that a victim is not necessarily a "weak and passive individual, seeking to withdraw from an assaultive situation" (p. 11). Victim-precipitation analyses were used to examine robbery (e.g., [55]), aggravated assault (e.g., [56]), and rape (e.g., [57]). Despite once being considered cutting-edge theorization,

criminologists have since condemned victim-precipitation studies for their undertone of victim blaming [58]. To this day, victim precipitation remains a controversial concept and is rarely used in contemporary research [59].

In the 1970s, the field moved toward investigating victim selection by studying factors associated with victimization risk. Fattah [60] describes this period as an evolution from micro- to macro-victimology, as studies of specific types of victimization were eclipsed by studies of victimization trends and patterns. This shift is explained, in part, by victimologists attempting to distance themselves from victim precipitation and, in part, by the introduction of the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) in 1972. Studies using NCVS data reveal that offenders share characteristics with victims (e.g., male, young, urban resident, unemployed) [51]. The introduction of the NCVS led to theoretical advancements in victimology, including opportunity theories such as lifestyle theory and routine activities theory.

Lifestyle-exposure theory (or lifestyle theory) seeks to explain variation in the likelihood of personal crime victimization [51] that is largely driven by differences in criminogenic exposure based on individual lifestyles that include " . . . *routine daily activities* [emphasis added], both vocational activities (work, school, keeping house, etc.) and leisure activities" [51] (p. 241). Considered "one of the first systematic theories of criminal victimization" [59] (p. 466), Hindelang and colleagues [51] developed this theory after analyzing victimization survey data across several cities and discovering that victimization was not randomly distributed across space or time (i.e., there exist high-risk places and high-risk times) and that certain characteristics were disproportionately shared by offenders (i.e., high-risk persons). In short, the risk of personal victimization increases when lifestyle patterns increase exposure to high-risk places, times, and persons.

Around the same time, Cohen and Felson [52] developed routine activities theory to explain high rates of urban crime during the 1960s. They hypothesized that increasing crime rates could be explained by changes in routine activities (i.e., more time spent away from the home, more women joining the labor force, more families eating out, etc.). Cohen and Felson [52] posited that the occurrence of a criminal act requires the convergence of a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardians. They focused on a class of crimes called "direct-contact predatory violations," defined as "illegal acts in which "someone definitely and intentionally takes or damages the person or property of another" [52] (p. 589) citing [61] (p. 4). To test their theory, they conducted a time-series analysis of official crime data of homicide, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, and burglary and found statistically significant relationships between changes in routine activities and increases in rates of each crime type. While it shares many similarities with lifestyle theory, routine activities theory is distinctive because of what constitutes "risky behavior" in the context of victimization [62]—i.e., "where lifestyle theory conceives of risk in *probabilistic* terms (e.g., certain behaviors elevate one's odds of being victimized), routine activity theory simply *describes* the victimization event itself (e.g., if the three key elements converge, victimization happens, yet if one of the elements is missing, victimization is avoided)" (p. 335).

Lifestyle and routine activities theories have dominated victimization research and remain the most common perspectives for explaining individual risks and aggregate rates of victimization [24,25,63]. It is not clear, however, whether these theories help us better understand immigrant victimization. We next evaluate research that uses these frameworks to explain the risk of victimization for immigrants generally, and immigrant youth specifically.

3. Victimization Theories and Immigrant Victimization

Consistent with lifestyle and routine activities perspectives, immigrants are more likely to have socioeconomic and demographic characteristics associated with a lower risk of criminal victimization (e.g., older, employed, married, living in a family household, etc.) [10]. Researchers suggest that two mechanisms support this expectation: selective migration

and community externalities [10]. The former is about who emigrates (i.e., those with less involvement in risky behavior), while the latter is about where immigrants tend to settle (i.e., immigrant communities characterized by higher levels of guardianship and informal social control). Both mechanisms, Xie and Baumer argue, support the theoretical expectation that the foreign-born will have a lower risk of victimization than the U.S.-born. While Xie and Baumer do not directly test these mechanisms, other studies have found some empirical support for lifestyle theory and routine activities theory, as we discuss below.

Studies that compare victimization risks among immigrants and U.S.-born persons find that while immigrants generally experience less criminal victimization due to differences in lifestyle and routine activities, victimization risk varies across immigrant groups. For example, analyzing data from the Seattle Neighborhoods and Crime Survey (SNCS), Wu and Altheimer [40] explore whether certain demographics (relating to gender, age, education, employment, marital status, home ownership), crime-avoidance strategies (lights on, extra locks, dog ownership, neighborhood watch involvement), household locations (near bars/nightclubs, hotels/motels, neighborhood disorder), and lifestyle choices (out of home in the evening and/or day, frequently visiting bars/nightclubs) explain the risk of property and violent victimization among foreign-born Asians, Latinos, Blacks, and Whites compared to those who are U.S.-born. Wu and Altheimer find that when lifestyle and routine activities are considered, immigrants overall have a lower risk of property and violent victimization. They also find that foreign-born Asians have lower odds of property and violent victimization risk compared to U.S.-born Whites and U.S.-born Asians, while foreign-born Latinos have lower odds of violent victimization and higher odds of property victimization compared to U.S.-born Whites and U.S.-born Hispanics. These findings reinforce the importance of accounting for immigrant heterogeneity and highlight the need for additional theorization and future research to address this diversity.

Studies of immigrant youth victimization find evidence in support of lifestyle and routine activities theories but also reveal limitations to explaining victimization risk among this population (e.g., [8]). These studies are in line with studies of youth victimization more generally (e.g., [7,64–67]). Peguero [8] analyzed data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 to determine whether aspects of lifestyle and routine activities, such as deviant lifestyle (school-based misbehavior) and target suitability (involvement in academic, sport, club activities), contributed to the risk of school-based victimization of immigrant youth. Consistent with theoretical predictions, Peguero finds that immigrant adolescents were less likely to experience victimization when they participated less in these lifestyle and routine activities. Peguero also finds that first- and second-generation immigrant youth were less likely to experience victimization than third-generation (or more) immigrant youth, which is consistent with previous studies on the impact of acculturation on the victimization of immigrant youth (e.g., [7,68]).[1] Dissimilar to involvement in academic and club activities, participation in sports puts first- and second-generation immigrants at risk of victimization while protecting third-generation (or more) immigrants from victimization. These findings suggest there are differences not only in the effectiveness of routine activities in shielding immigrant youth from victimization, but also between immigrant generations. This research again highlights the need for more theorizing to analyze differences by routine activity type to determine if these theories hold across immigrant groups as well as generations.

Integrating Culture into Victimization Theories: The Case of Immigrants

As noted earlier, when it comes to immigration, studies of immigrant criminality and immigration and crime dominate scholarship. While this body of work is vast, only a subset of it engages cultural frameworks related to crime, even as those frameworks offer unique insight into offender motivation. At the same time, theories of victimization, including lifestyle and routine activities theories, rarely explicitly incorporate cultural arguments into their frameworks. Finally, despite a large body of scholarship on victimization, studies of immigrant victimization are relatively rare and, with few exceptions, studies of immigrant

victimization that engage cultural frameworks are even rarer, which we view as a significant limitation. As such, an important next step is to consider how integrating culture in theory, data, and method could potentially strengthen explanations of immigrant victimization.

Despite important advances in victimization theory, researchers have virtually ignored offenders in explaining victimization, limiting the utility of these frameworks [25,62]. Hence, while the offender's perspective is a central part of criminological theory, "it is curiously absent from much of the victimization literature" [25] (p. 51). Recently, however, scholars propose incorporating cultural theories of offending to revitalize victimization theory and research [69].

Cultural forces have long been considered motivating factors for criminal involvement (e.g., [70–72]). However, few researchers have contemplated a culture–victimization nexus. Kubrin and Ousey's [69] concern that victimological explanations often ignore offenders led them to consider how cultural theories of offending may help advance victimization theory. Reviewing major cultural frameworks, including deviant subculture (i.e., in which internalized value systems oppose mainstream culture), cultural heterogeneity (i.e., in which there are conflicting cultures and competing values over the appropriateness of illicit conduct), and cultural attenuation (i.e., in which weak mainstream culture leads to weakened social control and a higher likelihood of crime) (pp. 81–84), they review a nascent body of scholarship that unites cultural theories of offending to victimization. Inspired in part by Anderson [73], the street code victimization theory suggests that residents in neighborhoods governed by a street code are at higher risk of victimization [69] (pp. 85–92). In street-code culture, standing up to others when challenged or attacked is essential to preserving one's reputation and maintaining respect. Thus, in neighborhoods where the street code operates, residents will be more likely to stage resistance when facing an assault. Because the street code discourages disputants from backing down from conflict, assaults in disadvantaged neighborhoods should result in injuries more often than in non-disadvantaged communities [74] (p. 42). Suggesting that street-code victimization is just one example of how cultural theories of offending can and should be brought to victimization research, they encourage the integration of cultural theories with key components of leading theories of victimization more generally. For instance, they integrate cultural codes of violence with target suitability as a potential explanation for bar-fighting culture. Cultural theories have a lot to offer victimization research because they shift the focus away from physical characteristics and victim behaviors and instead direct "our attention to whether cultural exposures and socialization protect us from, or expose us to, victimization risks" [69] (p. 96). Despite these advantages and even as victimization theories lend themselves to cultural arguments in their explanations, much more could be done to explicitly engage the concept of culture in theorizing victimization, including immigrant victimization.

Cultural frameworks are most commonly invoked in studies of immigrant offending or immigration and crime. However, cultural arguments are also salient for immigrant victimization. Discussions of assimilation, acculturation, and culture conflict are common cultural frameworks in immigration-crime research. According to the "immigrant enclave perspective" [75,76] and "segmented assimilation theory" [77], immigrants who live in enclaves are less likely to engage in crime because enclaves provide residents with unique pathways for economic mobility and educational opportunity without requiring residents to assimilate into the dominant culture.[2] Scholars also argue that enclaves protect immigrants from assimilation into criminal subcultures such as the street code, which are common in disadvantaged communities where immigrants often settle [78,79]. Research into the social and cultural aspects of ethnically homogenous immigrant neighborhoods finds that central cities with a higher immigrant concentration experience significantly lower neighborhood violence [80]. Martinez, Lee, and Nielsen [81], for example, examine the relationship between a community's ethnic and immigrant composition, the existence of immigrant enclaves or barrios, and community-level drug violence within enclaves in Miami, Florida ("Little Havana," Cuban; "Latin Quarter," Central American; and "Little

Haiti," Haitian), and San Diego, California ("Barrio Logan," Mexican and Vietnamese). While risk of victimization varies by neighborhood ethnic composition, new versus old immigration, and levels of economic deprivation, "those residing in barrios or enclaves did not live in areas with significant levels of drug violence," according to their research (pp. 151–152). Similar arguments are relevant for juvenile delinquency. Desmond and Kubrin [79], for example, argue that, in line with the "immigrant enclave perspective" and "segmented assimilation theory," the cultural preservation provided by enclaves may act as a safeguard against immigrant youths' adoption of deviant values and lifestyles.

This research and theorizing suggest that, by extension, immigrants who reside in enclaves are less likely to experience criminal victimization. Immigrant enclaves may protect residents from victimization because the presence of capable guardians in the form of less-acculturated or unacculturated community members may mitigate the culture conflict experienced by immigrant youth. This is similar to Portes and Rumbaut's [82] generational consonance versus generational dissonance typology. Generational consonance occurs when both parents and children agree on selective acculturation, acculturate at a similar rate, or remain unacculturated, while generational dissonance occurs when children acculturate at a different rate than that of their parents, thereby resulting in the rejection of parental guidance [82] (p. 258–305). A capable guardian in this context is not only physical (i.e., a community member who is present to assist), but also social, because the effects of acculturation are not limited by space (i.e., internalized values and morals that emphasize social cohesion and encourage legal obedience).

Some studies, however, find evidence that contradicts these arguments (e.g., [83,84]). Velazquez and Kempf-Leonard [83] interviewed 30 Mexican immigrants living in enclaves in San Jose, California, and Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, to better understand victimization risks for Mexican immigrants living in the U.S. They discovered that homogeneity within these enclaves puts respondents at a higher risk of victimization due to increased social exclusion, social stigmatization, and limited economic and social opportunities outside the enclave. Conflicting findings regarding the prevalence of victimization in enclaves may be due to study differences (e.g., methodology, destination site, immigrant population, etc.), but may also indicate the limitations of cultural theories, as they are currently conceptualized, in explaining the causes and risks of immigrant victimization.

In light of this discussion, one possible route to advancing theorizing on immigrant victimization involves integrating the role of culture. A key part of culture that is uniquely relevant to the immigrant experience is language. Focusing on the role of language, we argue, will allow researchers to better integrate theory, data, and method in the study of immigrant victimization. Before we show why this is true, we identify data and methodological challenges that motivate our approach.

4. Immigrant Victimization: Data and Methodological Considerations

Theory development and data collection are intertwined endeavors in the sense that theory development shapes how data are collected and data collection shapes how theory is tested and refined. We identify data and methodological considerations for studying immigrant victimization, with a focus on the intertwined nature of theory and data. Among the most salient issues are the underreporting of victimization by immigrants to law enforcement, the underrepresentation of immigrants in national crime victimization surveys, and the linguistic challenges in both reporting victimization and including immigrants in victimization surveys.

4.1. Underreporting of Criminal Victimization

Cultural explanations may help explain not only the risk of immigrant victimization, but also why immigrants are less likely to report their victimization. Just as underreporting can result in inaccurate victimization estimates, it can also result in inaccurate theoretical explanations of victimization risk. When Sorenson and Telles [85], for instance, discovered that self-reported spousal violence rates among U.S.-born Mexican Americans were higher

than rates among Mexican-born immigrants and U.S.-born non-Hispanic Whites, they suggested that Mexican-born immigrants may face additive or multiplicative stressors, such as those associated with ethnic minority and/or immigrant status. This discovery was attributed to "culture conflict" [70], in which "members of subsequent generations of immigrant families are exposed to conflict between their familial culture of origin and the dominant culture in which they reside" [85] (p. 13). Hass and colleagues [86] critiqued these findings on methodological grounds, arguing that participants were asked to self-report victimization during a phone interview, and that "under these circumstances it is very likely that Mexican-born immigrants would be more reluctant to answer questions truthfully than would U.S.-born Mexican Americans, given the natural guardedness of new arrivals who are unfamiliar with the U.S. legal system and who may have less stable immigration status" (p. 97). They suggested these findings may actually reveal that Mexican-born immigrants are less likely to admit to experiencing spousal violence and less likely to report spousal violence due to cultural norms, which is consistent with other scholarship [87,88]. In short, theoretical precision is dependent on accurate data.

Underreporting of victimization among immigrants is well documented (e.g., [89]), particularly in cases of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and robbery, because reporting such forms of victimization can result in familial shame [14]. It is a problem acknowledged not only by researchers, but also by immigrants (e.g., [14,37]) and criminal justice system personnel (e.g., [16,90]). Immigrants' negative experiences with law enforcement in their home countries can influence their perception of law enforcement in the U.S. (e.g., [37,91]). Language barriers, fear of legal authorities, and unfamiliarity with the justice system all lead to underreporting (e.g., [14,34,90]). Poole and Pogrebin [34] conducted an ethnographic study of crime in a Korean community in Aurora, Colorado. They discovered that, like other immigrant communities that experience criminal victimization from others within their own community, Korean immigrants are more likely to be victimized by other Korean immigrants. Korean Americans, in this context, "have operated with near impunity since their victims have been afraid to report crimes to the police—a fear grounded in their experiences in Korea" (p. 65). This fear of law enforcement, in effect, makes Korean immigrants in Colorado suitable targets for motivated offenders who prey on this community knowing that they are highly unlikely to engage the assistance of capable guardians in the form of law enforcement protection. Poole and Pogrebin expect that as Korean immigrants integrate into American society, they will be more willing to report victimization and cooperate with law enforcement, thereby strengthening the community's perceived and received protection of capable guardians.

4.2. Underrepresentation of Immigrants in National Crime Victimization Surveys

Aside from reporting concerns, national data on the criminal victimization of immigrants are virtually non-existent. The NCVS did not include a question asking respondents to self-identify as non-U.S. citizens, naturalized citizens, or U.S.-born citizens until 2017. The question appears at the end of the survey and is asked only after respondents have completed the rest of the interview [92]. This may explain, at least in part, why research on immigrant victimization has largely relied on neighborhood-, city-, and county-level data. It is possible these data limitations contribute to the shortcomings of theories in fully explaining immigrant victimization, as these theories were developed using national-level crime and national-level victimization data. As a result, the recent redesign of the NCVS is likely to benefit immigrant victimization research in the same way that the original launch of the NCVS benefited victimization research more generally in the 1970s. Using NCVS data, researchers can establish national rates and trends of immigrant victimization and compare foreign-born versus U.S.-born victimization for the first time. While scholarship analyzing these data is minimal given the newness of the redesign, early studies show that foreign-born respondents report having a significantly lower risk of victimization compared to U.S.-born respondents (e.g., [10]).[3]

4.3. Linguistic Challenges

Language and cultural barriers frequently stymie data collection efforts on immigrant victimization at both the national and local levels. Concerning the former, the Census Bureau [93] estimates that 85 percent of foreign-born individuals in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home, with approximately 60 percent speaking English less than very well. As a result, data collection efforts with limited capacity to accommodate non-English speakers will unintentionally exclude most immigrants. The National Research Council [94] warns that under-sampling non-English speakers for victimization surveys can bias research that informs victim services policy, especially when other characteristics of this population make non-English speakers more likely to be victimized in the first place (e.g., because they are more socioeconomically disadvantaged).[4]

The NCVS is currently available in English and Spanish, with introductory letters in Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean. Field representatives are instructed to use an interpreter who is acceptable to the respondent for languages other than English, such as "a family member, a neighbor of the respondent, an official interpreter, or the field representative if he/she is fluent in the respondent's language" [95] (p. 35). Since 2011, the annual rate of completion of the NCVS in a language other than English has consistently remained around four percent (with approximately 85 percent of the non-English surveys completed in Spanish) [95] (p. 36). Given that around 200,000 surveys are conducted each year, that equates to approximately 8,000 non-English surveys completed annually (of note: these estimates demonstrate that non-English or limited-English-proficient speakers are highly under-sampled in the NCVS). These estimates are based on the responses to a survey instrument processing question, "What language was the respondent's interview conducted in?" [96] (pp. B3-65–B3-66). We learned from the NCVS's sponsor, the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), that these data are considered microdata and thus do not get processed into the public use file, and that to access them we needed to contact a Census Federal Statistical Research Data Center (RDC). However, after speaking with RDC representatives, we learned that data on the language in which the survey was conducted are also not included in the internal files housed within the RDC. While the Census Bureau has made interview language tables available at the request of the survey sponsor (see non-English survey estimates above), the RDC does not create other data files with language information. In short, despite efforts to administer the NCVS in languages other than English, data on which language the interview is conducted in are not made available to the public, limiting our understanding of how language affects immigrant victimization.

While efforts to make a survey accessible in multiple languages are commendable, survey instruments developed in English and directly translated into other languages—a common approach—may not accurately capture intended meanings. This is because direct translation, particularly approaches involving one or two translators such as one-for-one translation, forward-only translation, and forward-backward translation [97], tends to focus on literal translation at the cost of accounting for critical cultural differences such as patterns of expression and cultural idioms [98]. In fact, research on survey methods in multicultural contexts shows that even when preferred practices, such as "team translation" (or committee translation) [99] are used, there may still be material differences in technical term translation, dialect variations, and cultural understandings of survey concepts [95]. For example, Vujcich and colleagues [97] investigated the process and outcomes of translating sexual health and blood-borne virus surveys from English into Khmer, Karen, Vietnamese, and Traditional Chinese. Despite using a nuanced and layered approach of team translation plus TRAPD (Translation, Review, Adjudication, Pretesting, and Documentation) [100], they discovered that only nine of the 51 survey questions resulted in identical independent translations in at least one language. While some differences did not change the intended meaning (e.g., "How old are you?" versus "What is your age?"), the majority were material differences caused by misunderstandings of the original English survey items, dialect variations, differences related to technical terms, and cultural misunderstandings (e.g., "sexual

activities" was translated by one Karen translator as "sex among men and women"). As a result, even if best practices are followed, survey instruments may not be translated accurately. This, in turn, has implications for the validity of survey results.

Not including multilingual individuals in the development and validation of survey instruments designed to assess victimization has, at least previously, "left the field with a major gap in the data" [94] (p. 43). While the addition of the immigration status question will undoubtedly advance research, leading to the development of new theory, language accessibility remains a challenge for multilingual survey instruments and the accurate collection of crime victimization data, including among immigrants.

5. Integrating Theory, Data, and Method: Centering Language in Research on Immigrant Crime Victims

Our interest in centering language reflects the larger aim of integrating theory, data, and method in immigrant victimization research. By centering language, we mean that even though research frequently acknowledges language as a dimension of acculturation, few studies centrally focus on the direct effects of language, language barriers, linguistic assimilation, and/or linguistic isolation in the context of immigrant victimization. Given the unique pressures and expectations immigrants in the U.S. face regarding language acquisition (see [82] (pp. 214–257)), language is likely to play an integral role in how immigrants interact with others. Furthermore, as previously stated, language is also likely to present challenges for conducting quality research on immigrant victimization.

As alluded to in earlier sections of this paper, social networks play an especially important role in immigrant enclaves and can have both criminogenic and protective effects. This, Browning and colleagues [101] argue, is negotiated coexistence—that is, social networks may contribute to neighborhood collective efficacy (i.e., mutual trust and solidary combined with expectations for prosocial action), but they may also provide offenders a source of social capital (i.e., bounded solidarity, enforceable trust, reciprocated exchanges) that thereby diminishes the regulatory effectiveness of collective efficacy (p. 503). Reviewing some of the ways that language is discussed in the literature, we aim to demonstrate how negotiated coexistence may appear in research on language and immigrant victimization and underscore the need for more research to determine whether and to what extent language matters for immigrant victimization risk.

Immigrants may be more vulnerable to fraud and scams due to language barriers. Miller [102], reflecting on her experiences at Civil Society (a provider of legal and support services to immigrants who are victims of crime and regulatory practices in St. Paul, Minnesota), identifies common deficits that lead to victimization, such as barriers to securing housing, education, job training, employment, tax preparation, and family conflict resolution. Many Hmong and African-born immigrants, for instance, who want to buy a home in Minnesota are frequently victims of scams due to their limited English proficiency and underdeveloped reading skills, as at real estate closings immigrants are often asked to sign important documents without an interpreter present (p. 16).

Language barriers can also be exploited by abusers of immigrant spouses to maintain abusive situations. Keller and Brennan [103], who study domestic violence among Sudanese immigrants, Raj and Silverman [104], who study domestic violence among South Asian immigrants, and Menjívar and Salcido [5], who study domestic violence among immigrant women from major receiving countries, all emphasize how "power differentials that exist between men and women in whatever culture of origin appear to be amplified under the condition of being an immigrant" [38] (p. 6). They find that language barriers increase an immigrant female spouse's vulnerability to domestic abuse because a lack of English fluency can lead to social isolation, create barriers to financial independence, and present hurdles to seeking outside assistance (see also [88,103,105,106]). Due to limited access to resources and limited social networks, women may become dependent on their partners and families for daily functioning [86]. In addition, abusers may take advantage of this social capital, exploiting their partner's limited English by having them unknowingly sign

court documents, creating an unfair advantage in court proceedings [102]. This is common in cases involving child custody [90].

Language barriers may also increase the likelihood of violent victimization by limiting economic opportunities. Shihadeh and Barranco [42] examined the effects of linguistic isolation on the risk of homicide victimization for Latino immigrant communities in traditional and new destination areas using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Vital Statistics System.[5] They analyzed homicides in 755 counties and discovered that while traditional destination contexts appear to be relatively safe for Latinos, new destination contexts are far more dangerous, with Latinos being murdered at an alarmingly high rate. They portend that because Latino immigrants are more likely to face linguistic isolation in new destinations, they are less likely to have access to economic opportunities that would reduce their risk of homicide victimization. For similar reasons, language barriers may increase the risk of intimate partner violence in new destination areas. Morash, Bui, and Santiago [107] interviewed 182 women of Mexican descent living in Detroit, Michigan, and discovered that, among other findings, language barriers contributed to marital strain by stifling opportunities for economic success and preventing male partners from meeting gendered expectations of caregiving through breadwinning. According to one interviewee, "[My husband] didn't speak the language (English) and couldn't find a job . . . I felt that if he tried harder, he could find a job, and that he was a man, and he should support me" (p. 280).

Living in ethnic enclaves linked by language may or may not exacerbate victimization. It may exacerbate victimization, in part, because this form of neighborhood collective efficacy may lead to a source of social capital for offenders. According to Song's [31] mixed-method study of Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, "Asian criminals sometimes are confined to preying on their own people because of their limited communication skills" (p. 714). Language may be a source of social capital for offenders. For example, language may be a source of bounded solidarity as it provides neighborhoods with a sense of collective identity, and it may also be a source of enforceable trust as language is likely to encourage positive neighborhood-based action. Finally, language is also likely a source of reciprocated exchanges as shared language allows for the exchange of information, favors, or assistance. Collectively, these indicators may allow offenders who share a common language with each other and with others in their neighborhood to exploit such social capital and then victimize those in their neighborhood. If explained using the language of lifestyle and routine activities theories, not linguistically assimilating may turn immigrants into more suitable targets for victimization by other immigrants with whom they share a language. The presence of bilingual individuals in the household or the neighborhood, however, may mitigate victimization risks associated with linguistic isolation [108]. Gostjev and Nielsen [108] use data from the National Neighborhood Crime Study (NNCS) and the Census Bureau Summary Files to study the effects of English fluency on violent crime at the neighborhood level. They find a positive effect of English non-fluency on violent crime, but also show that this effect diminishes as English non-fluent individuals come to represent a higher proportion of the neighborhood population. In other words, living in ethnic enclaves linked by language may encourage pro-social networks that act as a protectant against victimization.

Similarly, there is evidence that language barriers may protect immigrant youth from victimization by insulating them from violent subcultures. Desmond and Kubrin [79] investigate the contextual effect of neighborhood immigrant concentration on delinquency using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. They find a negative relationship between immigrant concentration and delinquency after controlling for various neighborhood- and individual-level predictors and show that the protective effects of immigrant concentration are stronger for minority youths or foreign-born adolescents who maintain ties to their native culture. Desmond and Kubrin [79] theorize these groups may be more likely to benefit from these protective effects due in part to language, because "immigrants are more likely to be shielded from aspects of American culture that encourage criminal involvement (especially if English is not their primary language)" (p. 588). In

other words, these protective effects are the direct result of cultivating pro-social networks. This finding is consistent with research by Morenoff and Astor [109], who, using data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, discovered that immigrant youth are less likely to engage in violence when their families do not linguistically assimilate. While these studies focus on crime rather than victimization, given what is known about the victim–offender overlap [22], these findings suggest that immigrant populations who do not linguistically assimilate may experience less victimization.

What explains why language has been found to be both a risk and a protective factor? One explanation may hinge on social networks and negotiated coexistence, whereby pro-social networks are protective while networks embracing deviance are criminogenic. As the research reviewed demonstrates, when language isolates immigrants from pro-social networks, such as in the case of not being able to report abuse by a partner, the risk of victimization will likely increase. On the other hand, if language isolates youths from deviant peer groups, victimization risk is likely to decrease. Language-related victimization risk may also differ by immigrant group and destination site, with established immigrant groups in traditional destination sites more likely to thrive without having to learn English (e.g., Spanish speakers in traditional destination sites are less likely to experience victimization; [42]), whereas less established immigrant groups in new or traditional sites are more likely to experience victimization at the hands of fellow language speakers (e.g., Chinese and Vietnamese speakers in Los Angeles; [31]). Another explanation may hinge on routine activities, whereby differences in findings are due to generational differences among immigrants. For example, foreign-born immigrants may be more likely to victimize other foreign-born immigrants with whom they share a language due to a stronger suitable target effect, whereas their children may be protected from these harms if the families do not linguistically assimilate due to a stronger capable guardian effect. Whatever the explanation, there is little doubt that language ought to be central in theorizing and researching immigrant victimization.

6. Conclusions

In this essay, we identified theoretical, data, and methodological considerations central to the study of immigrant victimization—an area of research that deserves more attention from scholars. We advanced the idea that to better understand immigrant victimization, theory, data, and method should more closely align, and we proposed language as an aspect of culture to demonstrate the utility of such an approach. There are several policy implications generated by this approach. Such lines of inquiry may, for example, assist policymakers in developing more effective and targeted crime prevention and victim policies that are sensitive to cultural differences; guide school administrators with diverse student populations in making more informed operational decisions about school-based programming; direct legislators towards policy solutions that alleviate economic stressors known to lead to crime in immigrant communities by developing targeted job training courses; provide local officials evidence to justify funding low-cost English-language courses; and give victim services offices evidence-based reasons to invest resources in creating and disseminating culturally appropriate literature on victimization prevention in languages other than English. Consistent with these suggestions, the Justice Department recently announced a language access initiative [110], which reflects a nationwide effort to assist law enforcement agencies in meeting their obligations to provide meaningful language assistance to limited-English-proficient individuals in the context of public safety. These are just a few examples of how a more integrated approach that centers language may impact the lives of immigrants. At the same time, immigrants are not the only group vulnerable to victimization.

Researchers hope that studies will aid in the development of more effective victimization-prevention policies [58]. These efforts are best supported by theoretically informed studies that explain victimization risk across diverse populations. This includes vulnerable populations other than immigrants, such as people with disabilities, people experiencing

poverty, people who are unstably housed or experiencing homelessness, people who are justice-impacted or justice-involved, people who identify as women, non-binary, or gender non-conforming, and people who identify as LGBTQ. At the same time, intersectional identities may increase the vulnerability of certain groups to victimization. As a result, we encourage those conducting research on vulnerable populations to consider how victimization risks change when multiple social identities exist. Some scholars are already doing this. Menjívar and Salcido [5], mentioned earlier, describe the layered realities of immigrant women who experience domestic violence by "underscore[ing] women's experiences in domestic violence as intimately linked to broader structural forces—political, economic, social—for these create multiple layers of oppression and hierarchies within which immigrant women's lives are enacted" (p. 900). Following their lead, we encourage scholars to consider how these layered realities impact both the research process and the study results.

In closing, immigrant victimization remains an important but understudied research focus in the areas of both immigration and victimization studies. Existing victimization theories, including lifestyle and routine activities theories, explain some but not all aspects of immigrant victimization. Cultural frameworks, which are only recently making inroads into victimization research, are also useful for understanding immigrant victimization. Taking a page from Kubrin and Ousey [69], we argue that integrated theories of victimization that draw on various aspects of lifestyle, routine activities, and cultural theories of offending may be most useful for advancing theory. However, theory testing and refinement require valid data and appropriate methodological approaches, allowing researchers to accurately and thoroughly document immigrant victimization at both local and national levels. Improving the integration of theory, data, and method for studying immigrant victimization remains a key priority. When it comes to integration, research would benefit the most from theoretical and empirical inquiries into the role of language along the lines identified in this essay. Victimization research has immense potential to effectuate policy change that can minimize victimization, including among vulnerable groups such as immigrants.

Notes

1.   Immigration and birthplace information for students are reported on the parents' survey. First-generation students are children born outside the U.S.; second-generation students are born in the U.S. and have at least one parent born outside the U.S.; and third-generation (or more) students are born in the U.S. as are both of their parents.

2.   While definitions vary, an ethnic enclave is defined as an area "characterized by a concentration of businesses owned and operated by immigrants from the same country of origin, or their direct descendants" [111] (p. 4).

3.   The NCVS does not ask about the documentation status of non-U.S. citizens. While Xie and Baumer [10] improvise by treating respondents who refuse to answer or answer "don't know" to the citizenship question as a proxy for undocumented immigrants, such data limitations mean that victimization risks for undocumented immigrants remain largely unknown.

4.   We recognize that not all immigrants are limited English proficient just as there are limited-English-proficient people in the U.S. who are not foreign-born. However, there is an undeniable correlation between limited English proficiency and foreign-born status.

5.   While some communities in the U.S. have a long history of welcoming new immigrants and are often referred to as "traditional destination contexts," others such as "new destination contexts" have not experienced much immigration until recent decades. Shihadeh and Barranco [42] consider new destination areas to be counties in states that exhibited a 50 percent or more increase in the Latino population from 1990 to 2000 such as counties in Georgia, Mississippi, and Virginia.

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