Title: When is a Myth Itself a Myth? Immigrant Criminality and the Canadian Public

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Abstract:

When is a Myth Itself a Myth? Immigrant Criminality and the Canadian Public

Survey-based evidence gathered over the past several decades suggests that substantial minorities of the Canadian public associate immigrants with crime and crime with immigrants. In this note, we ask whether the myth of immigrant criminality imputed to the public is not itself a myth. We question whether the connection is a salient and enduring part of the public's mindset or whether it is largely an artifact of the closed-ended items employed to explore the topic. We argue that responses to closed-ended questions on this topic are affected by a "halo effect" response bias – a tendency to associated positive attributes with positively evaluated targets and negative attributes to negatively evaluated targets. In support, we show (1) that responses to open-ended questions tell a very different story, (2) that attitudes toward immigrants strongly predict the likelihood of making the immigrant-crime connection when closed-ended items are used, and (3) that priming a possible immigrant-criminal linkage in a survey enhances this likelihood for subsequent items.

Keywords: immigration, criminality, public opinion, survey methodology

Résumé:

Quand est-ce que le mythe lui-même est vraiment un mythe ?

Criminalité immigrante et le publique canadien

Les données récoltées par le biais de sondages depuis plusieurs décennies suggèrent que des minorités importantes du public canadien associent les immigrants aux crimes et les crimes aux immigrants. Dans cette note, nous nous demandons si le mythe de la criminalité immigrante inculqué au public n'est pas lui-même un mythe. Nous questionnons si la connexion est partie intègre de la pensée du public ou si elle est largement un artéfact des questions fermées employées afin d'explorer le sujet. Nous disputons que les réponses aux questions fermées sur ce sujet sont affectées par des réponses biaisées de « l'effet de halo » - une tendance à associer des

attributs positifs à des cibles positivement évaluées et des attributs négatifs à des cibles négativement évaluées. En preuve, nous montrons (1) que les réponses aux questions ouvertes nous racontent une histoire bien différente, (2) que l'attitude envers les immigrants prédit fortement la tendance à faire la connexion entre les immigrants et les crimes lorsque des questions fermées sont utilisées et (3) que de sous-entendre le lien entre les immigrants et les criminels dans un sondage augmente la possibilité d'assomptions subséquentes.

Mots-clé: immigration, criminalité, opinion publique, méthodologie de l'enquête

Introduction

Survey-based evidence gathered over the past several decades suggests that substantial minorities ranging from 20 per cent to 50 per cent of the Canadian public associate immigrants with crime and crime with immigrants. For example, Roberts and Doob (1997) cite a 1995 Angus Reid poll showing that almost half of a national sample agreed that minorities were "more likely, on average, to be involved in crime than people from other racial or ethnic groups" (p. 485). Similarly, Palmer (1996) cites a 1989 Environics poll in which about 47 per cent of the sample agreed with the assertion that immigration increases crime. And Simon and Sikich (2007) use survey data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) to show that somewhere between 21 per cent (reported for 1995) and 29 per cent (reported for 2003) of Canadians affirm such a connection. Perhaps based on this body of evidence, the public's putative association of immigrants with crime has become sufficiently well-established that it no longer requires documentation. Rather scholarly attention on the question has shifted in Canada to debunking the validity of this connection (Hagan, Levi & Dinovitzer, 2008; Thomas, 1993; Wortley, 2009; Zhang, 2014), or to identifying the origins of this widespread misconception (Chan, 2013).

In this note, we ask whether the myth of immigrant criminality imputed to the public is not itself a myth. To be sure, substantial minorities of the population affirm such a connection if asked specifically about it. However we question whether the connection is a salient and enduring part of the public's mindset or whether it is largely an artifact of the methodologies employed to explore the topic. The methodologies in question here involve exclusive use of closed-ended items to document the finding. Closed-ended questions are most frequently used in survey research because they are easier to code and yield a convenient table summarizing the sample's views on the subject in question. However, a limitation of this question mode is that

the conversation is largely one-sided. The survey designer not only selects the subject matter to

be discussed, but also frames the context of the question and the available response options. As

a result, there is a possibility that closed-ended questions may *create* rather than *capture* a

respondent's perspective on an issue (Zaller & Feldman, 1992). In turn, exclusive reliance on

closed-ended questions can generate "conventional wisdoms" regarding public opinion that are

seriously misleading.

Our argument in this note is that the public's apparent widespread acceptance of

immigrant criminality is such a case. We begin with the observation that profiles of the public

based on other methodologies – open-ended questions – are starkly different from those based on

closed-ended items. We then suggest an explanation that might account for such differences, and

provide support for that account with both observational and experimental data.

Empirical Argument

Surveys do not often include both open- and closed-ended questions about the same

topic, but when they do, the two modes tend to generate response patterns that are quite different

(Geer, 1988; Schuman & Presser, 1979; Schuman & Scott, 1987). Certainly that has been the

case with Canadians' views about the causes of crime.   In 2005 and again in 2008, the

Environics research group asked its national samples in an open-ended question to indicate the

major causes of crime in society, allowing respondents to cite up to *ten* causes. (See the

Appendix for the wording of this and other items used in the analysis.) Following that question,

respondents answered a battery of closed-ended questions in which they assessed the importance

of various possible causes, among which was "too many immigrants".   In response to the open-

ended question, about 2.5 per cent of the sample in each year cited immigrant-related causes.

However, when respondents were then asked specifically if "too many immigrants" was an

important source of crime, 29 per cent (2008) and 33 per cent (2005) indicated that it was at least "somewhat important".[1]

Which of these contrasting profiles best reflects the public's association of immigrants with crime and crime with immigrants? While survey methodologists have long debated the merits of open- versus closed-ended questions for assessing the public's *attitudes*, most would acknowledge that open-ended responses provide a useful means of determining what the respondent has "in mind" when he or she thinks about a subject – that is, it reflects what is salient and accessible to the respondent within the schema in question (Geer, 1991; Kelley, 1983; Knight, 1985). This approach suggests that whether or not respondents have previously embraced the view that immigrants are an important source of crime in society, such a connection is not a salient or top-of-mind consideration when thinking about the causes of crime; rather it requires a cue before it is triggered and mentioning immigrants as a possible crime cause in a question may serve as such a cue or prime.

Why would the presence of a cue have this effect? One possibility, alluded to above, is that respondents hold this view, but it is a minor consideration for them and not readily accessible from memory until reminded of it. However, as it happened, the Environics respondents *were reminded* of immigrants as a possible source of crime *prior* to being asked the open-ended causes of crime question. This occurred when respondents were asked a series of immigrant-related questions earlier in the interview, one of which dealt with the job Canada was doing keeping criminals out of the country. Given that the presence of this prime produced so few immigrant-related responses to the open-ended "causes of crime" question, it would seem

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[1] Of these, 12 per cent in 2005 and 8 per cent in 2008 responded that "too many immigrants" was "very important".

reasonable to conclude that rather than being a remote or inaccessible connection in their

schema, it was likely not previously part of that schema at all.

Another possible explanation is that the cueing effect in responses to the closed-ended

question is an instance of a "halo effect" in cognitive processing – a cognitive bias in which

people tend to associate positive attributes with objects about which they have positive feelings

and negative attributes with negatively evaluated objects.[2] The halo effect in social judgements

has been recognized by social psychologists for almost a century and has been well-documented

in a wide range of rating tasks (Kahneman, 2011; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). For example, there

is a rich body of research documenting the tendency for subjects to impute positive personal and

professional attributes to attractive people (Feeley, 2002; Palmer & Peterson, 2012). If the

association of crime with "too many immigrants" is such an instance, we might expect that

association to be much more in evidence for those with negative feelings about immigrants.

As noted above, the Environics surveys asked respondents to agree or disagree to a series

of statements concerning immigrants in Canada. To tap respondents' global sentiment about

immigrants, we developed an index based on four statements that referenced immigrants in

general – that immigrants take jobs away from other Canadians, that too many of them are not

adopting Canadian values, that there is too much immigration, and that immigrants contribute

positively to the country and economy.[3] After reversing the last of these, we constructed an

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[2] Some have labelled the latter a "reverse halo" or "devil" effect. This biasing effect in social judgement has been conceptualized in somewhat different ways within different theoretical traditions. Although we have adopted the label "halo effect" to identify it in this discussion, it could also be understood as use of an "affect heuristic" (Slovic, Finucane, Peters & MacGregor, 2007), or it could be framed as an instance of "motivated political reasoning" (Leeper & Slothus, 2013; Lodge & Taber, 2013).

[3] The other three immigrant-related items introduced elements that may have confounded interpretation. One asked about nonwhite immigrants specifically, another asked about refugees, and a

index of general anti-immigrant sentiment by averaging responses across the four items. For the 2005 and 2008 Environics surveys, the index has a range of 1-5, sample means of 2.51 (sd=1.05) for 2005 and 2.47 (sd = 1.03) for 2008 and Cronbach's alphas of .74 (2005) and .73 (2008).

Is there support for a "halo effect" in responses to the closed-ended question about immigrants as a cause of crime? To test this, we collapsed scores on the anti-immigrant index into "low" "moderate" and "high" subgroups and compared the likelihoods of making the immigrant-crime connection across these subgroups. Table 1 presents the resultant cross-tabulation for both Environics surveys. The table shows for both years a strong monotonic association (Somer's d = .50 (2005) and .49 (2008)) between holding anti-immigrant sentiments and viewing immigrants as a source of crime in society. 8 per cent or fewer of those "low" in anti-immigrant sentiment made such a connection, whereas over 60 per cent of those "high" in anti-immigrant sentiment did so. In short, there would seem to be strong support for a "halo effect" in this case. Those predisposed to think ill of immigrants tend to make the criminality inference while those with more favourable impressions tend not to make the inference; as we observed with the open-ended question, neither subgroup tends to make such an inference spontaneously – that is, without a cue.

Table 1. Importance of Immigrants as a Cause of Crime in Society by Level of Anti-immigrant Sentiment (Source: Environics EFC054 and EFC081)

		Anti-Immigrant Sentiment							
		Low		Moderate		High		Total	
		2005	2008	2005	2008	2005	2008	2005	2008
Importance of Immigrants as a	Not at all	64%	63%	35%	37%	10%	10%	35%	37%
	Not Very	29	28	42	45	25	27	32	33
	Somewhat	5	6	18	15	38	42	21	21
	Very	2	2	5	3	27	21	12	9

third, mentioned above, asked whether Canada was doing a good job of keeping criminals out of the country.

cause of crime	Total	100% N=422	100% N=343	100% N=422	100% N=312	100% N=494	100% N=334	100% N=1338	100% N=989

Notes:
1. Weighted data used for both surveys.
2. 2005 chi square (df=6)=478 p< .0001; 2005 Somers d =.50
3. 2008 chi square (df=6)=345 p< .0001; 2008 Somers d =.49

While the Environics data are consistent with our thesis, there are limitations to this empirical argument. First, it is possible the "halo effect" is in the opposite direction – that is, perceptions of immigrant criminality may be shaping these other disparate judgements about immigrants. We would argue that this seems unlikely, given that very few of those with anti-immigrant sentiments (less than 5 per cent) felt strongly enough about immigrant criminality to cite it in the open-ended "causes of crime" question (data not shown). Nevertheless because we cannot test this directly, it remains a possibility.

Second, the "halo effect" fits well with existing theories of cognitive processing (see for example Gilovich, Griffin & Kahneman, 2002), but is difficult to establish with observational data because we cannot determine with confidence that respondents were extrapolating beyond their experience when making this judgement (Murphy, Jako & Anhalt, 1993). To enhance this confidence, we conducted an experiment designed to test more effectively the impact of cueing or priming on the likelihood of making the immigrant-crime connection.

In the experiment, we administered a survey to 294 student participants.[4] We asked the students to consider a number of different arguments for admitting fewer immigrants to the country and to indicate for each how valid the argument was on a 10-interval scale running from "not at all valid" to "extremely valid". Among the seven arguments posed to them was

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[4] The survey was administered to a first year introductory political science class. It took about 10-15 minutes to complete and was administered in class time. The student sample was evenly split between males (49.8 per cent) and females (50.2 per cent), and had a mean age of 19.7 years (sd = 1.3).

"increases the crime rate". However, a random half-sample first answered another battery of questions having to do with the causes of crime. In that battery, students were asked to consider a number of possible crime causes and to indicate for each how important the cause was on a 10-interval scale running from "not at all important" to "extremely important". One of the seven "causes" included in this battery was "too many immigrants". In effect, then, half of the sample received a prime suggesting that immigration may be a cause of crime *before* they were asked whether this was a valid argument for limiting immigration.[5]

Given our thinking above, we suspected that students who were otherwise disposed to oppose immigrants and immigration would be more likely to view increased crime as a valid reason for opposing immigration whether or not they received the "cause of crime" prime. That is, as with the Environics data, the wording of the dependent variable itself constitutes a prime of sorts and should trigger a halo effect. However for those receiving the additional prime suggesting that immigrants might be a possible cause of increased crime, this halo effect should be much accentuated.

As noted above, the dependent variable in this analysis is the subject's rating of "increases the crime rate" as a valid reason for opposing immigration. On this 0-10 scale, the sample mean is 3.61 (sd = 2.72). (See the Appendix for the wording of this and other items used in the analysis.) An "immigrant negativity" measure was constructed from two batteries of items, one reflecting six arguments for increasing the number of immigrants admitted to the country and the other reflecting six arguments for admitting fewer immigrants.[6] After reversing

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[5] The "causes of crime" battery was separated from the "immigrant criminal" item by a section of seven unrelated questions dealing with general political orientations. For the other random half of subjects, the order in which these batteries were administered was reversed.

[6] The dependent variable was one of the arguments for admitting fewer immigrants, but was excluded in the development of the "immigrant negativity" measure.

the six "pro-immigration" items, we computed an immigrant negativity measure based on the

student's mean score across the twelve items. With a range of 0-10, this index has a sample

mean of 4.48 (sd = 1.86) and Cronbach's alpha of .87. A dummy variable was created to

indicate whether the subject was part of the treatment group (i.e., was primed with the item citing

immigrants as a possible cause of crime) or the comparison group (was not primed).

To test our expectations, we employed OLS regression to estimate the degree of

"validity" students accorded "increases the crime rate" as a reason for limiting immigration.

Predictors in this equation were "immigrant negativity", a dummy variable reflecting whether or

not the student received the prime, and an interaction term representing the product of these two

variables. Table 2 summarizes the results of the regression analysis.

Table 2. OLS Regression of Subjects' Association of Immigrants with Crime on Immigrant
Negativity and Immigration-Crime Connection Prime (unstandardized coefficents)

Dependent Variable Predictors	Immigration Increases Crime Rate
Constant	1.06*
Immigrant Negativity	.50***
Prime (No prime= 0, Prime = 1)	-1.44*
Immigrant Negativity x Prime Interactive Term	.46**
Adjusted R^2	.29***
N	294

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

The results are largely consistent with expectations. As predicted, the significant

coefficient for immigrant negativity (.50) indicates that those who were less enthusiastic about

immigration were more likely to connect immigration with crime, even without a prime. Also as

predicted, the Immigrant negativity x prime interaction (.46) is both significant and positive.

This finding suggests that the impact of anti-immigrant sentiments on validity judgements was affected by the presence of the prime – primed students with negative views of immigrants were more likely to impute validity to the immigrant-crime connection than unprimed students with similar negative views.

Interestingly, Table 2 hints that the "halo effect" may not have been limited to those with anti-immigrant sentiments. It may also have affected the ratings of pro-immigrant students, but in the opposite direction. The significant and negative coefficient (-1.44) for the Prime variable suggests that, for those who were positively disposed to immigrants – that is, with very low anti-immigrant scores – primed subjects were predicted to view the association as *less* valid than unprimed subjects with similar positive views. A comparison of "validity" ratings for primed and unprimed subjects who scored in the bottom twentieth percentile of the anti-immigrant index showed that this was indeed the case, but the differences were not large enough to be statistically significant (data not shown).

Discussion & Conclusion

"The literature on response effects . . . makes it clear that survey questions do not simply measure public opinion. They also shape and channel it by the manner in which they frame issues, order alternatives, and otherwise set the context of the question" (Zaller & Feldman, 1992, p. 582). We have argued in this note that use of closed-ended questions to profile the public's association of immigrants with crime produces a distorted view of public opinion on this issue. While responses to such questions suggest that the immigrant-crime connection is both salient and widespread, our analysis suggests differently that the connection is largely induced by the question-asking process itself. Respondents do not spontaneously make this connection even when primed; and for the substantial minorities who affirm the connection when asked, both our

observational and experimental analyses suggest that the basis for such a response is largely affective in origin (a "halo effect" stemming from anti-immigrant sentiment) rather than cognitive or experiential.

Why is this important? On one level, it is important simply because it is a "conventional wisdom" about Canadian public opinion that does not survive closer scrutiny and hence warrants correction. Rather than being in a state of "moral panic" about immigrant criminality (Wortley, 2009), the Canadian public does not tend to associate immigration with society's crime problem, and the minority that does affirm a connection seems to be responding to a suggestion rather than a top-of-mind pre-occupation.

On another level, it is important because it serves to remind us of the limitations associated with methodologies employed to capture the public's thinking on various topics. The use of closed-ended questions to capture public opinion is predicated on prior exploratory research (often using open-ended questions) to discover the parameters of public thinking (Schuman & Presser, 1981). As we have shown here, use of closed-ended items to *identify* those parameters can produce seriously misleading conclusions.

Thirdly, our scrutiny of public opinion on this issue suggests that while few Canadians are pre-occupied with immigrant criminality, many more are open to such a suggestion. We have long known that elite discourse tends to shape and validate the parameters of legitimate debate in western societies (Zaller, 1992). Indeed, Cochrane and Nevitte (2014) have shown that the emergence of anti-immigrant parties in Europe has been instrumental not only for validating the public's latent animus towards immigrants, but perhaps more importantly, for effectively bundling the immigrant "problem" with a host of other social ills such as unemployment and

crime. As we write, Canada has no nativist party seeking to fill this role; however our analysis

suggests that, should one emerge, it might well find fertile soil for such a message.

Appendix

Environics Surveys EFC054 & EFC081 – Question Wordings

Anti-immigrant Sentiment and Immigrant-criminality Prime

> Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with
> each of the following statements:

- ■ Overall, there is too much immigration to Canada
- ■ Immigrants take away jobs from other Canadians
- ■ There are too many immigrants coming into this country who are not adopting
     Canadian values.
- ■ Overall, immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Canada.
- ■ Canada is doing a good job keeping criminals and suspected criminals out of the
     country (immigrant criminality prime)

Open-ended Causes of Crime Question (up to 10 causes recorded)

- ■ In your opinion, what is the major cause of crime in Canada today?

Closed-ended Question – Immigrants as a Cause of Crime

> Do you think each of the following is a very important, somewhat important, not very
> important or not at all important cause of crime in Canada today?

- ■ Too many immigrants

**Student Experiment: Question Wordings and Descriptive Statistics For Treatment and
Comparison Groups**

	Primed Group Mean (sd) (N=147)	Unprimed Group Mean (sd) (N=147)	Significance of F-test

Dependent and Conditional Variable Items

Question: In the debate over immigration policy in Canada, proponents/critics offer a number of reasons why Canada should increase the number of/admit fewer immigrants to the country next year. Some of those reasons are listed below. For each argument, please check the interval that best reflects how *valid* you think that reason is: *(Items rated on 10-interval scales ranging from "Not at all Valid" to "Extremely Valid")*	***Pro-Immigration Items*:**			
	- allows Canada to fill gaps in our workforce	4.52 (2.82)	5.11 (2.99)	p < .082
	- enriches our culture by introducing diversity	6.34 (2.90)	5.91 (2.87)	p < .204
	contributes new ideas for solving problems	6.12 (2.72)	5.56 (2.63)	p < .056
	- allows families to be reunited	6.97 (2.72)	7.14 (2.59)	p < .569
	- allows Canada to address an aging workforce	5.97 (2.83)	5.91 (3.03)	p < .874
	- addresses our moral obligation to the globe	5.50 (2.41)	4.68 (2.74)	p < .007
	Anti-Immigration Items			
	- puts too much pressure on provincial social services	5.40 (2.50)	5.16 (2.62)	p < .412
	- too many immigrants don't want to fit into Canadian society	5.01 (3.07)	4.72 (3.17)	p < .423
	- increases the unemployment rate	5.48 (2.72)	5.88 (2.82)	p < .223
	- increases the crime rate in the country *(dependent variable)*	3.94 (2.74)	3.28 (2.69)	p < .040
	- undermines traditional Canadian values	3.73 (3.05)	3.25 (2.83)	p < .166
	- takes jobs away from Canadians	5.73 (3.24)	5.10 (3.31)	p < .099
	-weakens Canadian cultural identity	3.69 (3.13)	3.35 (3.09)	p < .359
Anti-Immigrant Index	Index based on mean score of all pro & anti items except the dependent variable (Pro items reversed)	4.52 (2.82)	5.11 (2.99)	p < .834

Prime Item

Question: How important is [Too many immigrants] for *explaining the problem of crime in our society* – . . . check the interval between "Not at all Important" and "Extremely Important" that best reflects your assessment of its importance. *(Item rated on 10-interval scale ranging from "Not at all Important" to "Extremely Important)*	2.70 (2.34)	2.49 (2.35)	P< .836

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