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## **Immigration as Threat: A Content Analysis of Citizen Perception**

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### **Abstract**

Public discourse concerning immigration and immigration policy often relies on the characterization and universalization of the threats that are posed by increasing immigration. It is the specification and reference to these threats that allows one to consider immigration as “moral panic.” It is through this lens, that I undertake a content analysis of letters to the editor that appeared in a large southwestern city newspaper from January 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2005. This study describes the extent to which these threats seem to resonate with individuals who wrote and had published letters to the editor regarding immigration issues.

## **Introduction**

Public conversations surrounding immigration and its policy often involve the description and universalization of the threats that increasing immigration is thought to pose. This is not new. Our country has a long history of treating new immigrants -- both documented and undocumented -- as “dangerous others” As Perry, Fernandez and Costelloe (2009: 91) noted:

Each cohort of “new immigrants” was perceived as the alien and foreign “Other.” They have been regarded as outside the boundaries of the imagined community of the United States. Successive groups of immigrants were thought to represent distinct and threatening “races.”

Today, much of this restrictive policing of our national boundaries has been grounded in deep suspicion and often mistreatment of the newcomers (Perry et al. 2009). The described threats are numerous. Immigrants are thought to present a threat not only to our personal safety in terms of crime but also to our economic well-being, our culture, our status and even our health. The perception of immigrants as threatening and as “dangerous others” has undoubtedly heightened in the years following the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001. One finds evidence of this in a number of newly implemented government policies (i.e., the Patriot Act) that have severely restricted the rights of non-U.S. citizens. For example, the U.S. government now requires special registration of some Arab-Americans and Muslim noncitizens and has allowed for secret immigration hearings involving suspected terrorists (Perry et al., 2009).

In this exploratory study, I use a content analysis of letters to the editor to examine a variety of threats that are allegedly posed by the increasing presence of immigrants, and the extent that these threats appear to resonate with some individuals.

### **Linking Moral Panic and Ideology**

The link between moral panic and ideology is a useful theoretical lens for looking at this phenomena. In terms of moral panic, Stanley Cohen noted that at times:

a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. (Cohen, 1972:9)

Put more simply, “moral panic” describes the nature of certain social reactions to perceived deviance and threats. Implicit in the term “moral panic” is the belief that “the threat is to something held sacred by or fundamental to the society” (Thompson, 1998:8).

That is, what distinguishes moral panics from other forms of public apprehension are both the force with which the threat is felt and its potential impact on societal values and morals. If not appropriately addressed, many believe that the problem threatens to tear at the moral fabric of society. In the United States, threats to such values as family (particularly children), culture, personal safety, and religion seem to have the greatest likelihood of resulting in moral panics than other types of public concerns.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda noted that “the concept of moral panics expands our understanding of social structure, social process, and social change.” They argued that moral panics work to make more clear what behaviors are acceptable and which cross the moral boundaries of society, and how moral panics demonstrate that there are limits to how much diversity a society can endure (1994:29). Studying moral panics shows how official policies and social responses to perceived deviance do not generally spring forth from rational debate founded on objective appraisals of the problem. Instead, the social reaction that forms moral panics generally originates with the real or imagined threat to certain “positions, statuses, interests, ideologies and values” (Cohen, 1972:191).

A vital element of moral panics is the identification of individuals as evil “folk devils,” or those labeled as outsiders or deviants (Cohen, 1972). They are identified as the source of concern and fear. These individuals or groups are perceived not only as problematic but at odds with the normative values and morals of the society in which the panic takes place. A core component of this process involves the use of stereotypes to paint distinct individuals as possessing similar characteristics simply because of group membership. This results in the perception that all group members have the same problematic traits, which in turn emphasizes and exaggerates the differences between “us and them” (Citcher, 2006:8). This process of demonization is an important stage in the development of expanded social control measures and punitive policies founded on difference.

Moral panics are generally a response to some new problem or a perceived reemerging problem (Cohen, 1972). They tend to develop during times of increased uncertainty and anxiety. During these times, there is support, and often demand, for increased social control measures as we attempt to redefine normative standards, which have arguably become hazy because of rapid and dramatic social and economic changes. Political elites, the media, and special interest groups often exploit these anxieties in an effort to define and frame particular problems. They, then, present the problem to the public in overly simplistic and sensationalistic terms, which have clear policy implications. It is this exaggeration and/or distortion of the problem that accompanies moral panics and illustrates the link between moral panics and ideology.

Drawing on the two forms of ideology as outlined by Gouldner (1976) and Larrain (1983), Ted Chiricos (1996) notes that moral panics are ideological in two senses. First, they are ideological in that they involve rational, partisan discourse that attempts to mobilize public action in the pursuit of some particular interest (1996:26). That is, some stakeholder or interest group identifies a problem and explains it in a manner that encourages heightened public awareness, concern and, subsequently, demands for effective responses. Larrain (1983) regarded this as the “positive” or neutral form of ideology. Chiricos goes on to explain that moral panics are also ideological in that they involve the attempt to mobilize public action and that there is a distortion of

reality in pursuit of that objective. According to Larrian (1983), this is the negative form or function of ideology. It is this distortion that links moral panics and ideology.

In regards to public discussions concerning immigration, one can note both forms of ideology. First, the discourse involves reports about the problem that are accompanied by calls for corrective action, whether it is building a wall between countries, the further militarization of the border, or implementing a guest worker program. We can also readily note negative ideology at work in that often this discourse is rooted in a distortion of the problem. One distortion seems to involve the universalization of threat. In fact, there are those who argue that all forms of ideology are negative in the sense that in an attempt to mobilize public action and to reach the greatest number of people, it is necessary to present the problem in overly-generalized terms (Larrain 1983). It is important to convince as much of the public as possible that this problem in some way affects them. In terms of immigration, then, it may be important to universalize the threats that increased immigration poses. One way this is accomplished is by referring to and describing multiple types of threat such as cultural threat, economic threat, political threat and criminal threat. The more threats referred to, the greater saliency for a wider social audience.

### **Characterizing the Threat**

In examining the threats that are often part of the discourse on immigration, it is important to remember that this dialogue is diverse and expressed at a variety of institutional sites by an array of individuals and groups, and for a wide range of purposes. However, because *anti-immigration* discourses display similar patterns and support similar policies, they belong to the same discursive formations (Thompson 1998).

Cultural threats involve the belief that immigrants somehow threaten “our way of life.” That is, immigrants with distinct cultural patterns infiltrate our country, drastically altering, diluting or destroying American culture. Today, these cultural concerns include the belief that immigrants, particularly Latinos, possess an inability to assimilate, are unintelligent, and lack proper work ethics and, thus, consequently live in habitual poverty (Costelloe 2008). Furthermore, some perceive immigrant groups as less patriotic and maintaining closer ties to their homeland than to the United States. These supposed characteristics contribute to the demise of an “American identity.” Expressed concerns about (and opposition to) such things as bilingual language, education, street signs, and election ballots or to the importance of making English the “official language” also seems linked to fear of cultural deterioration. Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington (2004: 221) provides an apt example of this concern, when he describes the problem of Mexican immigration as “the leading cause of the deterioration of American society, because the constant influx of immigrants has socially, linguistically, and economically diluted American unity and identity.”

The threat that immigration poses to U.S. culture is not as readily apparent as some would have us believe. To the extent that there truly exists a distinct and definable American “identity,” it is unclear how such an identity can be divorced from its past. Except for native populations and those whose family members were brought to this country against their will, most of us can trace our family heritages to an immigrant population. In short, American culture is created out of a diverse set of cultural patterns and beliefs that which have become amalgamated into what some now refer to as an

“American identity.” The position of those opposed to Latino immigration suggests that Latinos are different from past immigrant groups. That is, that their large numbers, shared language and concentration in close proximity to their home borders make assimilation less likely. Citrin et al. (2007) note that these arguments assume that assimilation (the eradication of difference) is more desirable than pluralism (the acceptance and celebration of diversity). Moreover, the research does not seem to support the assertion that Latino populations threaten American culture (see e.g., Citrin et al. 2007)

Immigrants are also represented as posing an economic threat, either to one’s own economic well-being or to the economic health of the nation. On a personal level, references to economic threat encourage people to perceive the presence of immigrants as a threat to their own or familial economic prosperity. This concern manifests in a variety of ways, which include references to increased competition for desirable jobs and the reduction in individual wages as a result of the increased supply of labor that is willing to work at or below current wages. Threats to individual economic security is also expressed by negative references to the increase in taxes that citizens pay and that go toward welfare, medical care, and education for immigrants. There is often the perception that immigrants who get jobs, educational opportunities, and social services are taking away the same resources from U.S. born individuals. For some, immigrants also represent an economic threat to the overall well-being of the U.S. economy. Here, the perception is that immigrants place strains on jobs, resources, housing, and disproportionately benefit from social welfare programs. (Espenshade and Hempstead 1996).

Though largely inconclusive, some research has suggested that the economic threat posed by foreign-born populations is often over-exaggerated. For example, a study by the Pew Hispanic Center found that increases in the immigrant population are uncorrelated with negative employment experiences of American-born workers (as cited in Kochhar 2006). The contention that immigrant populations unfairly benefit from social services such as welfare and housing subsidies is also highly suspect, as these benefits often require proof of legal resident status before they are obtained. Finally, it should be noted that many immigrants also pay sales tax and property taxes, which are used to subsidize these benefits.

As mentioned earlier, the American public has long assumed that newly arriving immigrants are inherently drawn to criminal behavior. Historically, few immigrant groups have been fortunate to avoid the imposition (and the consequent detrimental effects) of the criminal label. Today, at least in some parts of the country, the same is true of Latino immigrants who are often portrayed as being disproportionately involved in drugs and violent crimes. Pat Buchanan (2006:27) promotes this perception of criminal threat when in reference to inadequate controls at the border, he states, “How many American women must be assaulted, how many children molested, how many citizens must die at the hands of criminal aliens . . . before our government does its duty?”

However, the empirical evidence does not support this contention. On the contrary, 2000 U.S. Census data of incarcerated males demonstrate that foreign-born people commit fewer crimes per capita than U.S. citizens, regardless of race and ethnicity. Those born in the United States commit crimes at a rate that is approximately four times that of their foreign born counterparts. In fact, one study found that among

men aged 18–40, native-born men were more likely to be incarcerated than immigrants (Butcher and Piehl 1998a). In another study, the researcher found that recent immigrants had no significant effect on crime rates, and youth born abroad were less likely than native-born youth to be criminally active (Butcher and Piehl 1998b). Additionally, according to Ramiro Martinez, (2002) research confirms that immigrants actually provide a stabilizing effect on their communities, reducing crime rates and increasing the area's economic viability.

Finally, political threat refers to the fear the increase in the numbers of immigrants will eventually result in a shift in political power. Reference to voter ID requirements may involve latent concerns about immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, voting and thus possessing political power.

This list of threats is by no means exhaustive or mutually exclusive. There is the potential for some overlap. For example, a perception that immigrants are inherently and disproportionately involved in criminal behavior could be classified as both a cultural and criminal threat. Furthermore, there are potentially other important threats not elaborated here. For example, there have been references to environmental threats associated with immigration, ranging from environmental destruction such as litter and damage to the natural environment as a result of undocumented border crossings to the depletion of natural resources due to increased population. Some have even suggested that immigrants pose a medical threat in terms of the spread of diseases such as AIDS, tuberculosis, and hepatitis. Arizona Congressman J.D. Hayworth, for example, told a local business journal in 2006 that "Americans should be told that diseases long eradicated in this country- tuberculosis, leprosy, polio, for example - and other extremely contagious diseases have been linked directly to illegals."

### **The Current Study**

In the U.S. it estimated that there are currently about 11 million undocumented residents in the U.S., more than half are Mexican and Arizona is estimated to be among the states with the largest number of undocumented migrants. In the Phoenix metropolitan area, there are 1.4 million residents with whites making up a little over 70% of the population and Hispanic/Latinos of any race accounting for 34% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009)

These contexts are important. As Peter Andreas in his book *Border Games: Policing the US-Mexico Divide* (2000) points out: anti-immigrant sentiment is exacerbated in a community that has substantial inflows of immigration because controlling immigration becomes a political stage on which politicians, the media, and interest groups provide threatening imagery of immigration as a public concern (Andreas, 2000).

## Data and Methodology

This study is a content analysis of 492 letters to the editor concerning immigration that appeared in the Arizona Republic Newspaper from Jan 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup> 2005<sup>1</sup>. While this is the newspaper for the Phoenix metro area, it does have statewide circulation. Letters written by politicians and representatives of interest groups (when determined) were excluded from the analysis, since I was only interested in citizen perception, though these other sources did represent a good proportion of letters that were written. When beginning the analysis, it quickly became apparent that at times it would be difficult to determine whether individuals were referring to immigration, generally or whether the writers were only alluding to undocumented immigration. Therefore, all letters written by non-political figures that concerned immigration were included in the analysis. While the threats that immigrants pose may be associated more with undocumented immigration, there is past evidence that these threats, at times, have been applied to many immigrants, regardless of how they arrived here.

The year 2005 was an important year for Arizonans in terms of the immigration debate. This is because the upcoming 2006 election, featured a number of ballot initiatives that spoke directly to many of the concerns that people have about immigration. Some of the propositions that Arizona residents were asked to vote on included such items as:

- (1) denying bail in certain situations to undocumented immigrants who are charged with crimes;
- (2) barring those not in this country legally from collecting punitive damages for personal injuries;
- (3) prohibiting undocumented immigrants from enrolling in adult education classes, receiving state subsidized childcare, receiving scholarships, grants, tuition assistance or in-state tuition rates; and
- (4) declaring English as the state's official language (<http://www.azsos.gov/election/2006>).

Of course, these proposed policies, many of which speak directly to threats described in this paper, engendered significant debate and political pandering and garnered much public attention prior to the 2006 election.

## Results

For the year, there were 4,576 published letters to the editor. Of those, 492 or 11% were immigration related, 344 (70 %) of those referred to no specific threat, but the majority of those 189 (55%) still expressed negative sentiments toward immigration. Negative sentiments toward immigration without referencing any of the described threats are illustrated below:

*“no one born in the United States should be a citizen unless one of his or her parents is a legal U.S. citizen.”* (letter to the editor February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005)

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<sup>1</sup> Letters to the Editor can appear in print, on-line or both places. However, only those appeared in print are analyzed in this study.



*“To deport or not to deport? That’s easy deport them. Send the illegal immigrant community a message.”* (letter to the editor July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2005)

Many of the letters of these sort addressed the Newspaper’s policy of using the term “*undocumented*” immigrant rather than “*illegal*” immigrant. This appeared to cause a bit of a firestorm with many taking issue with this policy:

*It’s illegal immigrant, not undocumented migrant, you morons!*” (letter to the editor April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005)

*“why does the Arizona Republic continue to use the term ‘undocumented’ immigrant or migrant? This is an incorrect term....The proper phrasing is ‘illegal immigrant.’*” (letter to the editor July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005)

Thirty percent of the letters concerning immigration referred to at least one type threat as defined in this study, and some referred to more than one type of threat. I counted each type of threat only once for each letter. For example, if a letter referred to numerous dimensions of economic threat it counted as one reference to economic threat. Also, if a letter referred to more than one type of threat (i.e. economic and cultural threat) each threat was counted. There were 169 threat references.

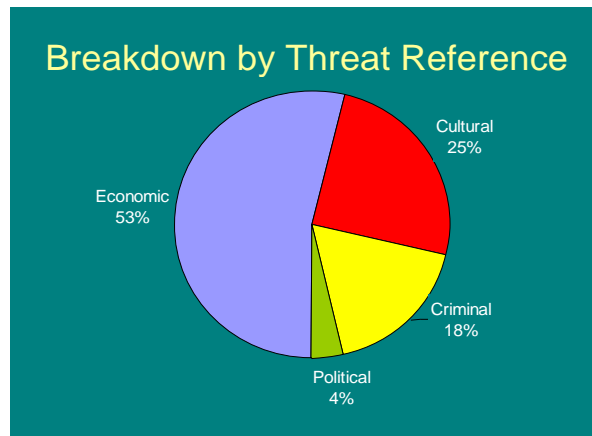


Figure 1 shows how these threats were distributed. Political threat was the least commonly referred to threat making up only 4 % or 6 of the 169 references to threat. The majority of these letters were written in response to a proposal to require voter identification cards and were predicated on the concern that undocumented immigrants were voting in general elections. Most expressed similar sentiments to following letter writer:

*“Non-citizens do not get to vote—period!”* (letter to the editor August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005)

Others were more clearly indicative of a sense of threat. For example, one writer noted:

*“The Mexican nationals are taking over the Southwest, Eventually, they will dominate the population and elect their own leaders.”* (letter to the editor January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005)

The most surprising finding was that only 18% or 30 threat references involved criminal threat. Criminal threat only relates to the perception that immigrants are responsible for higher crime rates or are disproportionately involved in criminal activity. It did not refer to residence status. Many letters did suggest that all undocumented immigrants are criminals because they are here illegally, but I did not consider these as expression of criminal threat. The following are typical of the letters that did suggest a direct relationship between immigration and crime:

*“It seems to me that Mexico is at the root of a lot of the troubles we here in Arizona are having. Crime, drugs, possible terrorist activities.”* (letter to the editor February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005)

*“...Mexicans did not attack us on 9/11, but they are doing it just as stealthily. Slipping across the border...committing heinous crimes, making bail (if they get caught) and leaving the country.”* (letter to the editor April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005)

*“We need to stop illegal immigration now once and for all so we can...reduce crime and make American lives better overall. (letter to the editor January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005)*

Of the 169 references to threat 42 or 25% of them referred to cultural threat. A number of these threats were in response to making English the official language of Arizona. For example, one letter simply stated:

*“we need laws...to protect our language.”* (letter to the editor January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2005)

Some letter writers, however, were more concerned with the broader effects that immigration has on our culture. The following examples are illustrative of such concerns:

*“allowing people to come here, live here and survive perfectly well speaking only their native language is destroying this country.”* (letter to the editor January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2005)

*“Americans have fought too hard and too long to allow Mexico (or any other country) to export a culture that tries to dismantle what we have worked to achieve...”* (letter to the editor July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005)

*“This influx of Mexican citizens guts our culture ....”* (letter to the editor July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005)

*“immigration, and the cultural difference The Republic glorifies have, to a great extent, turned my town into a third-rate city.”* (letter to the editor October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2005)

Over half (53% or 91 threats) of the referenced threats were classified as economic threat. Not only were economic concerns more likely expressed, they were also the most diverse. That is, they did simply tend to focus on one issue such as higher taxes, less jobs, or the depletion of economic resources, but addressed all these issues. The following represent typical concerns expressed by the writers:

*“...our illegal aliens are rewarded with jobs, medical care, education, etc.”*  
*“...if we could stop this constant influx of illegal...We wouldn't have to spend our tax dollars spent on education, insurance, jails and prisons: the list goes on and on.”* (letter to the editor March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005)

*“these fence hoppers have obtained thousands and thousands of taxpayer-paid education dollars under false pretenses.”* (letter to the editor July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2005)

*“they are taking jobs from blue-collar Americans who would be happy to work for a living wage but can't, because the illegals have 'underbid' them.”* (letter to the editor July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2005)

While the results of this study are, of course, in no way generalizable, economic threat is the most salient at least for those who wrote and had letters published during 2005 year. The saliency of economic threat may be expected in today's precarious labor market. In a time, when for many stable and long term employment has been replaced with low wage, service sector jobs with little or no benefits, it may be that economic threat has saliency for a wider audience.

One threat, however, that is notably missing in the above discussion and deserves greater attention is racial threat. Racial threat, which was expressed most aptly by Hubert Blalock (1967), who suggested that as the number of racial minorities within a particular area increases, opposition in various forms—including violence—also increases. However, rarely (and none in the current study) does public discourse about undocumented immigration explicitly refer to the racial characteristics of immigrants. This may be due not to a lack of concern about the racial ramifications of immigration, but may result from a desire to cloak racial concerns in more socially acceptable terms. Some, for example, have suggested that words like “welfare” and “crime” are simply code words for race. That is, instead of directly discussing race, which has become socially taboo, many use “race coding” to allude to perceived negative aspects of different races and ethnic groups (Gilens 1996). Because of a perception of disproportionate minority involvement, words like “crime” and “welfare” and even references to “cultural dissimilarity” allow those who are so inclined to articulate negative feelings for minority groups without ever specifically mentioning race. Some suggest that these “code words” for race are particularly useful to political and economic elites who wish to tap and exploit negative racial perceptions and resentments among whites in the implementation of what are essentially race-based policies. In short,

references to economic, cultural, criminal, and political threats of undocumented immigration may simply be masking racial concerns (Costelloe, 2009).

### **Conclusions**

Casting immigration concerns in terms of threat serves two related purposes. The first, as already mentioned, is to over-generalize the problem in an effort to mobilize public action and second is to cast undocumented immigrants as “other” and often as “dangerous others.” Such portrayals allow us to more easily deny or ignore the humanness of those who risk their lives to seek a better life in the U.S. In such instances, then, we more easily succumb to what Dario Melossi (1985) called “vocabularies of punitive motive.” That is, we allow lawmakers to pass legislation that are at best ineffectual and at worst harmful and mean-spirited with little or no public opposition. In fact, it is the nature of moral panics to produce responses that are fundamentally inappropriate and potentially harmful. To couch immigration discourse in terms of these threats, simply runs the risk of developing policies that are based on stereotypes and that attempt to scapegoat certain populations and which in the end justify punitive and often inhumane responses. As long as we continue to allow demagogues such as Pat Buchanan and self-proclaimed cultural warriors like Bill O’Reilly to frame these discussions in terms of threat and otherness, in terms of our dissimilarities rather than what we have in common, we will continue to fail to progress toward rational and common sense solutions to this critically important issue.

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