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Kim H. Chuong
University of Guelph, hchuong@uoguelph.ca

Saba Safdat
University of Guelph

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(De)Constructing Multiculturalism:
A Discourse Analysis of Immigration and Refugee System in Canadian Media

Kim H. Chuong

(hchuong@uoguelph.ca)

Saba Safdar

University of Guelph

Abstract

A succession of policy changes to the immigration and refugee system has been made in Canada in recent years by the Conservative federal government. Since most people's understandings about immigration issues come from exposure to the news, the media have an important role in producing and reproducing prevalent public opinions to support and legitimize, or criticize, social and political actions. The present study examines how the immigration and refugee policy changes have been represented in mainstream print media and provides an important interface between recent political decision-making and society with regard to immigration issues. In our analysis, we demonstrate that there is a construction of the existing system as facing crisis due to rampant frauds to legitimize the implementation of more restrictive "get-tough" policies as pragmatic and commonsensical interventions. On the other hand, there is a privileging of framing immigration as being necessary for society, albeit in economic rather than sociocultural terms. In the media, social categorizations of immigrants into "good" and "bad," and refugee claimants into "genuine" and "bogus," are deployed to support the policy changes for a market-driven immigration system while restricting the admission of refugees and family-class immigrants, who are often portrayed as a burden on public resources.

Introduction

Canadian Multiculturalism and Immigration Development

The proclamation of an official multiculturalism by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971 has marked Canada as the first country to adopt multiculturalism at the policy level. It is reaffirmed legislatively in the *1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *1988 Multiculturalism Act*. The institutionalization of multiculturalism was historically linked to the evolution of immigration regulations from those structured along racial and ethnic discriminatory lines to restrict immigration from outside of Europe to the point system using factors deemed to be universal and objective, such as education, language proficiency, age, and work experience (Abu-Laban & Gabriel, 2002). As a policy, Canadian multiculturalism is situated within a broader political ideology of Western liberal democracy, which upholds individual rights and freedoms and equality before the law (Kymlicka, 2007). Furthermore, in the last 40 years, there have been shifts in emphases from recognition of cultural diversity in 1970s, to equality and combating discrimination in the 1980s, and finally to civic integration focusing on participation in the mainstream society and identification with national culture and its values in the 1990s and onward (Fleras, 2009). Aside from being a policy, Canadian multiculturalism is

also "part and parcel of a normative project for society building" (Winter, 2011, p. 16). Thus, it is integrated into a larger public discourse about what society should be like and what it means to be Canadian.

The metaphor of a cultural mosaic in which different social groups and their ethnic cultures co-exist has been found to play a significant role in the construction of the national identity of a multicultural country which values and tolerates diversity, often with a presumed contrast with the American melting pot (Reitz, 2014; Winter, 2007). On the international stage, multiculturalism has been increasingly framed as a policy area that Canada can export ideas to other nations as a model of diversity accommodation and a tool for enhancing business and global competitiveness (Abu-Laban & Gabriel, 2002). Despite its widespread acknowledgement, Canadian multiculturalism has also generated endless debate about its impacts on society. The common arguments in political and public domains are that multiculturalism leads to social segregation of ethnic minority members; it undermines national culture and national identity by encouraging or even obligating ethnic minority members to give pre-eminence to their ethnic cultures and identities; and it leads to excessive cultural relativism and condones illiberal practices since there is no limit to the accommodation of cultural practices (Banting & Kymlicka, 2010; Ryan, 2010). Adding to the debate are global anxieties with national security and political radicalism amongst people of Arab and Muslim backgrounds after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. These arguments are not restricted to Canada and a retreat from the notion of multiculturalism based on similar arguments has occurred in the political and public rhetoric of many European states (Banting & Kymlicka, 2010). However, public support for multiculturalism in Canada has continued to be strong and created a positive environment that plays an important role in the development of Canadian immigration system, which takes in relatively high levels of immigration, and constitutes a resource to enable program development that addresses issues of immigrant integration (Reitz, 2014).

Current Sociopolitical Context

The current Canadian federal government has engaged in extensive overhaul of immigration and citizenship policies since 2008 after the Conservative Party came to power as a minority government in 2006 and won its first majority government in 2011. Furthermore, multiculturalism has been subsumed under the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, which arguably positions it as being associated with immigrants and ethnic minority groups only (Abu-Laban, 2014). Winter (2015) proclaimed that, "in current government discourses, multiculturalism is no longer viewed as dealing with majority-minority relations, but rather portrayed as an 'intra-minority affair' to be managed by the dominant group" (p. 638). Likewise, Day (2000) contended that,

The problem of Canadian diversity *has always been public,* it has always involved a

state-sponsored attempts to define, know, and structure the actions of a field of problematic Others (Savages, Québécois, Half-breeds, Immigrants) who have been distinguished from unproblematic Selves (French, British, British-Canadian, European) (p. 5).

Social categorization of who the "others" are in relation to the "selves" constructs who belongs and who does not. While the construction of the "others" represents some immigrants as dangerous and threatening, the construction of the model or ideal immigrant who can be welcomed is also necessary to build and maintain the image of a multicultural country (Dhamoon & Abu-Laban, 2009). According to Lynn and Lea (2003, p. 428), "in defining and categorizing those who would be 'Other'; visible difference, ethnicity, religious belief and language (among other qualities) may all be used."

The Present Study

The present study examined discourse in mainstream print media about the major policy changes implemented in 2012, the year after the Conservative Party won its first majority government. Fowler (1991) asserted that the language used in newspaper coverage can form ideas and beliefs through the selection of what events to report and their transformation in the process of publication. Additionally, Bauder (2008) indicated that the media typically present multiple viewpoints and, thus, provide an important site for the contestation of ideas and perspectives on social issues. The research questions that guided the analysis of the study were: (1) How were the immigration and refugee policy changes constructed in the media? (2) What was the categorization of immigrants and refugees in media discourse? (3) How was the categorization constructed and deployed to mobilize support or criticism for the new policies?

Method

The Data

The data included 632 articles that were published in 2012 in two national newspapers, *The Globe and Mail* (112) and *National Post* (105), and four provincial newspapers, *Calgary Herald* (95), *Montreal Gazette* (91), *Toronto Star* (125), and *Vancouver Sun* (104). Our study was limited to English language newspapers only. These newspapers were chosen because they are among Canada's most distributed daily newspapers and based in the provinces with the largest shares of immigrant and refugee settlement (Ontario, British Columbia, Quebec, and Alberta). The articles were collected through the Canadian Newsstand database using the key search terms "immigration reform", "immigration policy", "refugee reform", or "Jason Kenney" (the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration from October, 2008, to July, 2013). Of these, 456 are full-length news articles, eight are briefs, and 168 are opinion articles (*i.e.* editorials, columns, opinions, commentaries).

Analytical Approach

The data were analyzed using discourse analysis: a theoretical and methodological framework that encompasses a variety of approaches, each with different analytical emphases. We adopted a social constructionist epistemology, which posits knowledge and truth as being created and sustained through social interchanges of people in specific social-cultural, geographical and historical moments (Gergen, 1985). Potter (1998) referred to "discursive social psychology" as "the application of ideas from discourse analysis to issues of social psychology" (p. 234), which development in the 1980s has aimed to move the analytical and explanatory focus from cognitive processes to rhetorical resources and practices that people draw on from their sociocultural environment. Thus, language is not considered a neutral and transparent medium that passively reflects an external reality, but as constitutive of reality and performative in that people use specific rhetorical strategies to construct particular accounts of reality and to accomplish certain functions, such as persuasion, blaming, justification (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wood & Kroger, 2000). We also drew on the discursive psychological approach for social categorization which focuses on how categories are socially constructed and for what ends (Augoustinos, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The analytical process began with a full reading of the sampled articles and preliminary coding. The process of reading, coding, and writing of analysis was reiterative while attention was paid to recurrent themes, ways of portraying immigrants and refugees, and their rhetorical functions.

Results

Construction of a Broken Immigration and Refugee System Rife with Frauds

A range of different types of immigration and refugee frauds were reported in the media. These included: marriages of convenience for the purpose of immigration only, employment frauds to gain admission, residency frauds to maintain permanent resident status while living and working abroad, and "bogus" refugee claims which were typically associated with Roma asylum seekers from Europe, particularly from Hungary and the Czech Republic, and sometimes the Tamil asylum seekers from Sri Lanka who arrived by boats in 2009 (the Ocean Lady) and 2010 (the MV Sun Sea). A National Post news article with the headline, *Ottawa fails to stem Roma refugee tide*; Evidence of human trafficking worries Kenney (April 23, p. A.4), reported the immigration minister as having said that "the government has tried but so far failed to stem the tide of Roma coming into Canada and abusing its refugee system," and that "the flood of asylum-seekers is 'highly organized' and not at all spontaneous." The alleged abuse by a "flood" of Roma asylum seekers tied to organized human smuggling crime is markedly associated with the reporting that the federal government "hopes to push through the refugee reform Bill C-31" for a "new and faster asylum system."

Bill C-31, which was introduced in February, 2012, and assented in June, 2012, grants the immigration minister power to designate countries as safe and democratic and do not normally produce refugees, and creates the "irregular arrivals" category to designate groups of people who arrive in a way that can prevent timely investigation of their admissibility (*e.g.* boat) or on grounds of suspicion of human smuggling as "designated foreign nationals." Refugee claimants in this category are subjected to mandatory detention and their claims are fast-tracked for review. The access to appeal is often used as evidence that the existing system is slow and lacks the ability to deport swiftly those deemed inadmissible. A Calgary Herald editorial that featured the headline, *Smarter immigration; Jason Kenney is bringing common sense to portfolio* (September 22, p. A.11), stated that "the problems in Canada's immigration system have been, by now, well publicized. They include our inability to stop fraud and the inability to even expel admitted terrorists over the years." The "inability to even expel admitted terrorists" is illustrated in the article by the case of Mahmoud Mohammad Issa Mohammad, reported to be a Palestinian terrorist who "sneaked into Canada under an assumed name, along with his wife and children in 1987. . . . Even a 2001 ruling by the refugee board's appeal division that labelled him a terrorist and ordered him deported didn't work." Furthermore, this inability is pegged as a result of "endless rounds of appeals," which are "paid for by taxpayers" (reported to be "$3 million as of 2011" for the case). This article is not an isolated incidence that illustrates the failure of the existing immigration and refugee system with criminal cases. There are numerous media articles that have employed the same journalistic strategy. It should be noted that, on the other hand, the government has also been criticized in the media for amplifying the extent that certain types of frauds have happened, such as marriages of convenience and refugee frauds.

The abundant number of media articles on different types of frauds, which are frequently linked to human smuggling and other serious crimes, create a sense of crisis to the existing immigration and refugee system. Hier and Greenberg (2002) claimed that the construction of a crisis centres on the two notions of "risk," which harbors an element of uncertainty and disorder, and "risk-avoidance," which involves the ability of the state to intervene and respond to the perceived crisis. As will be shown in the next section, the policy changes positioned as crisis interventions are justified in the media as being necessary, pragmatic and commonsensical political measures.

"Get-Tough" Policies and the Categorization of "Good" and "Bad" Immigrants

By constructing the existing immigration and refugee system as facing crisis due to rampant frauds, government intervention in the form of more restrictive "get-tough" policies is legitimized as imperative (*i.e.* Bill C-31 and the Faster Removal of Foreign Criminals Act). The justification in the media to support tightening regulations employs the discursive strategies of nationalist positive self-presentation and affirmations of fairness and pragmatism that are well-documented in discourse and critical discourse liter-

ature (*e.g.* Augoustinos & Every, 2007; van Dijk, 1992). A Montreal Gazette editorial which reported favourably on Bill C-31 featured the headline, *Toward a better refugee-determination system* (February 21, p. A.18), and stated:

> Canada has a long-standing and well-deserved reputation as a place of refuge for people fleeing persecution in their homelands. At the same time, however, it has also gained repute as an easy mark for the unscrupulous who fraudulently use our generous refugee determination system as a way to get into Canada without submitting to standard immigration requirements and procedures.

In the extract, Canada is affirmed as having "a long-standing and well-deserved reputation" for helping refugees and, hence, portrayed favourably as a nation that is generous and willing, and has demonstrated its generosity to fulfill international humanitarian obligations. The nationalist positive self-presentation functions as a disclaimer to defend potential accusations of being inhumane and "turn[ing] our backs on those who need our assistance," as expressed in a Toronto Star column with the headline, *Refugee bill returns to the bad old days* (May 7, p. A.13). In the Toronto Star article, the positive national representation of being a compassionate country is used not to legitimize the new policy, but to criticize it as "run[ning] contrary to the tradition of humanitarianism so many Canadians are proud of," and argue that "Canada has been enriched by these refugees-turned-citizens, who became an important part of the Canadian fabric and made significant contributions to the building of our nation." Here, refugees are positioned in an inclusive manner as potential citizens and contributing members of society rather than foreigners who are fraudsters and cheaters.

A Calgary Herald editorial with the headline, *Send them back; Kenney is right to get tough with foreign criminals* (June 27, p. A.14), described the Faster Removal of Foreign Criminals Act as being "in the category of 'why didn't anyone think of this before.'" The new regulation, which was introduced in June, 2012, to grant the government power to deport non-citizen individuals convicted of six months or more in prison while limiting their access to appeal, is positioned as a common-sense policy that should have occurred earlier. The editorial further stated:

> The new legislation is the latest in a series of get-tough immigration policies from Kenney, ranging from crackdowns on bogus refugee claimants to evicting fake citizens and dealing with human smugglers and shady immigration consultants. Although we have taken issue on the scope of some of his policies, there is no arguing that Kenney is reshaping Canada's image as a soft target for immigration. By doing so, he has also made more room for legitimate, productive and deserving immigrants who play by the rules. Instead of accommodating criminals with endless appeals, we'll gladly take more of the law-abiding ones.

The extract illustrates how "get-tough immigration policies" are portrayed as making "more room for legitimate, productive and deserving immigrants who play by the rules" whom "we'll gladly take more of" into the nation. There is a differential categorization

of immigrants into those who are "legitimate, productive and deserving" and, thus, are *like us* and can be welcome, from those who are "foreign criminals" and "bogus refugee claimants" and, thus, are *not like us* and must be barred from entering the nation or expelled quickly if they have been admitted. This differentiation follows a key discursive resource that has been documented in debates over asylum seekers, who are differentiated into being "genuine" and "bogus" in order to legitimize restriction of refugee access and rights in the nation (*e.g.* Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Lynn & Lea, 2003).

Capdevila and Callaghan (2008) argued that the construction of the "good" and "bad" immigrants in British political speech conjures up the categorization of *the others* who are *not like us*: immigrants who pose permanent internal threat and danger to the nation's way of life and cultural identity because of the presumed impossibility that they could ever appropriately be part of the nation. In the media, the frequent association of "bad" immigrants and "bogus" refugee claimants with being cheaters and convicts of serious crimes warrants the claim that they are *not like us* and are *unwanted* for the danger that they pose to *our* society. Furthermore, the rhetorical appeal of being fair to "legitimate, productive and deserving" immigrants portrays the "get-tough" policies as firm but fair. According to van Dijk (1992, p. 115), "most characteristic of this kind of political discourse is not merely the nationalist self-praise, but also the strategic management of impression: whatever we decide, we are fair."

Building a "Just-in-time" but "Selective" Economic Immigration System

Whereas "get-tough" policy changes are portrayed as firm but fair, some of the policy changes are portrayed as making the immigration system "just-in-time" and "responsive" to Canada's economic needs, albeit being "selective" for the "right" immigrants. In the media, economic immigration is commonly presented as necessary and essential to help build the economy, fill the gap of the population structure due to an aging population, a shrinking workforce, and the need to meet labour shortages. The major policy changes to economic immigration in 2012 included the implementation of a separate skilled tradesperson stream and an overhaul of the point system under the Federal Skilled Worker Program. Specifically, the point system overhaul emphasizes higher level of language proficiency, younger age, and having pre-arranged job offer or experience in an in-demand occupations to be "just-in-time" to meet labour market needs. The notion of global competitiveness for the "right kind" of skilled immigrants and entrepreneurs is quite prevalent in the media. A Globe and Mail news article (*A pitch heard 'round the world*, May 12, p. F.1) indicated "it [Canada] must step up the effort to sell the Canadian brand around the world - to get those with the most talent to see it not just as a land of tolerance for diversity, but as a nucleus of economic opportunity." This comment portrays Canada as "a land of tolerance for diversity," which has been associated with the national identity of being a multicultural country, while expanding the scope of this identity to endorse an aspect based on economic rather than sociocultural terms.

A Vancouver Sun news article with the headline, *Skilled worker program relaunch*

planned for May (December 20, p. B.2), quoted Jason Kenney: "rather than bringing engineers to Canada to drive cabs or doctors to be corner store clerks, we want the engineers who we select to actually be able to work as engineers and the doctors to be able to work as doctors." The comment attunes to the high rates of unemployment and underemployment that have been widely documented among visible minority immigrants, and have often been attributed to racial and ethnic discrimination; language factors such as language proficiency which is mediated by having an accent (or not having the "right" accents); and institutional barriers such as credential devaluation and professional regulatory bodies acting as gatekeepers (*e.g.* Creese & Wiebe, 2012; Galabuzi, 2004; Grant & Nadin, 2007).

In the media, the racialized context of labour market with a significantly higher number of visible minority skilled immigrants being unemployed or underemployed despite their high education and professional qualifications is typically downplayed and redefined in terms of language proficiency. While language proficiency as a facilitator of labour participation is unquestionable, its emphasis as a compelling reason for the regulatory overhaul hinges on the representation of an immigrant being someone who does not speak or speaks very little English or French, and have low labour participation and rely on tax-funded public resources. A National Post column with the headline, *A growing Canada, reshaped by immigration* (February 9, p. A.14), asserted:

> Unfortunately, recent research shows that, unlike previous generations of immigrants, today's new immigrants may not be net contributors to government coffers. In a paper released in May 2011 by the Fraser Institute, author Herb Grubel calculated that immigrants represent an annual "fiscal burden" of $25-billion to Canadian taxpayers. Today's immigrants earn less and pay less tax, but get more from the government than their forebears.

Here, the racialized context of labour market, including issues of discrimination and institutional barriers which underlie the poor economic outcome of "today's immigrants" who are more likely to be visible minority members, is downplayed. However, emphasis is placed on their "fiscal burden of $25-billion" and not being "net contributors." A recommendation is also made to "prune the welfare state not only to increase immigrants' net contribution to Canada, but to draw people who aren't looking for handouts." Such statement not only detracts from institutional responsibility to address social inequality and racialization in the labour market; it redistributes the blame on "today's immigrants" by claiming them to be cheaters and freeloaders. Furthermore, the purported "fiscal burden" portrays immigrants already in Canada as the "internal others," who legally belong to the nation but are simultaneously deemed outsiders (Dhamoon & Abu-Laban, 2009), by reducing their national inclusion and belonging to solely economic terms while casting them as an economic burden to society.

Additionally, the selection for the "good" economic immigrants who are "right" for

the labour market is pitted against family-class immigrants in the media. According to a Vancouver Sun news article with the headline, *Newcomers over age 50 costly* (May 18, p. B.3), "older immigrants cost governments about $3 billion a year in health care, while none of those immigrants over age 50 has reported earning more than $15,000 a year." Family reunification has become synonymous with immigration of "older immigrants" and, by implication, parents and grandparents who will not be in the tax-paying workforce. Moreover, the article quoted the immigration minister as having said:

> Family sponsorship is a privilege, not a right. We are committed to family reunification within our system, but it has to be linked to our scarce public resources. It's not fair for us to raise taxes on Canadians to pay for future health care costs for folks who've never lived in the country or paid taxes in it.

The rhetorical appeal of being fair to Canadians categorizes family-class immigrants as *the others* who are *unwanted* for the costs posed to healthcare and public resources and the threat posed to the economic wellbeing of Canadians who have to pay taxes to cover *their* costs. It also asserts a common-sense notion that a nation has the right and duty to protect its "scarce public resources" from *them*: "folks who've never lived in the country or paid taxes in it."

The support for restricting family-class immigration is not without challenge in the media. A Toronto Star column (*Kenney's immigrant song sounds strangely off-key*, March 9, p. A.23) stated:

> What helped cushion the damage lurking in the uncertainty among those earlier waves? Clearly it was family and community. But this is what Kenney's policies will undermine, by weakening family unification as a rule, even though most Canadians support it. . . As relatively isolated individuals, they'll have fewer ways to draw on their culture and thread it into their new nation's.

Instead of being a drain on health care and public resources, family reunification is portrayed as a "cushion" for economic immigrants who are "relatively isolated individuals." There is an extension of immigrant national inclusion and belonging beyond economic terms to non-economic aspects of "family and community," which translates to a need for family-class immigration lest economic immigrants will "have fewer ways to draw on their culture and thread it into their new nation's." Thus, there is a rhetorical deployment of the national identity of being a multicultural country in which different social groups and their ethnic cultures are interwoven to build the nation to criticize the federal government's stance on immigration issues.

Conclusion

Overall, there is a privileging of framing immigration and refugee issues in economic terms in the media. The national identity of being a multicultural country is found to be variously deployed to either support economic immigration or expand immigration beyond economic terms. However, the social categorizations of immigrants into "good"

and "bad" and refugee claimants into "genuine" and "bogus" are prevalent in the media to legitimize market-driven economic immigration while restricting the admission of those considered a burden on public resources and not "right" for the economy (*i.e.* refugees, family-class immigrants). Such rhetoric conditions and reduces the national inclusion and belonging of immigrants, including those who have already lived in Canada as residents, to solely their economic contributions. Abu-Laban (1998) argued that "the worth of any immigrant" might be "measured on a host of grounds other than the purported statistical use of social welfare programs" (p. 199). Furthermore, "the problemitization of immigrant families ultimately fuels legitimacy for the idea that immigrants are a social/welfare/economic cost to Canadians and Canadian society and may, ultimately, negatively impact all naturalized Canadians as well as Canadians who are ethnocultural and racial minorities" (p. 205). The emphasis on individual economic self-sufficiency also limits any meaningful public discussion on addressing social and institutional factors that contribute to social inequality. At the current moment, it is difficult to discern the impacts, if any, of these recent policy changes on society and the intercultural relations between the majority and visible minority groups. Lacroix (2004) claimed that refugee policy and determination process have a profound impact on refugee subjectivities, including experiences of being out of control and being disempowered along with feelings of loss, sadness and anxiety. An important future research direction is to investigate how political conditions and prevalent public discourse about immigration through the media might influence intercultural relations, as well as immigrant and refugee subjectivities and psychological adjustment.

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