Beyond Innumeracy: Examining Qualitative Misperceptions about Immigrants in Finland

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Population innumeracy

• Uncertainty about verifiable demographic questions:
  - Immigrant populations
  - Racial group populations
  - Others
Innumeracy about immigrants (Ipsos MORI 2014)

Inflated by 19 percentage points
Population innumeracy

• Over-estimation linked to:

- Curtailment of immigrants’ rights (Herda 2013)
- Halt immigration flows (Semyonov et al. 2004)
- Deportation (Herda 2013)
- Opposition to affirmative action (Alba et al. 2005)
- Support for immigrant restrictions (Wilson 2001)
Moving beyond innumeracy

• Other misperceptions of interest…?

• Blinder (2013) 🇬🇧

  o Why are immigrants here?

  o What is their status?

**New Question**: Where are immigrants coming from?
Why might people be wrong?

• **Heuristic Decision-Making:**
  
  • **Cognitive Availability Heuristics** (Tversky & Kahneman 1973)
    • Contact with immigrants
    • Media exposure
  
  • **Affect Heuristics** (Zajonc 1984)
    • Negative affect toward immigrants
Finland

- Small and recent immigrant population
  - 3.5% (Statistics Finland 2013)
- Former sender nation
- No single source constitutes the majority
Question 1: Do Finnish respondents display uncertainty about the most common origin of immigrants?

Question 2: Do these misperceptions vary in patterned ways?

Source: crossroadsofmigration.com
Finnish National Election Study 2011

• **Sampling Universe:** People living in Finland who were eligible to vote in the 2011 elections

• **Method:** Quota sampling (gender, age and region)

• **Response rate:** 70%

• **Sample size:** 806 individuals
Which of the following is the largest group of foreign nationals residing in Finland?

a) Vietnam  

b) Russia  

c) Somalia  

d) Germany

Proportion guessing Somalia is significantly greater than zero (t = 13.06)
What percentage of people living in Finland are foreign nationals?

a) less than 1 percent

b) about 3 percent

c) about 8 percent

d) about 13 percent

Correct: about 3 percent
Other variables

- Cognitive Availability:
  - Television Hours
  - Internet Use
  - Political Newspapers
  - Residence Type

- Negative Affect
  - Perceived Cultural Threat

- Demographics:
  - Sex
  - Age
  - Ethnic Minority
  - Income
  - Unemployment
  - Education Level
Analysis

• Fixed effects multinomial logistic regression models:

**Predicting Source Misperceptions**
- Newspapers
- Education
- Age
- Female
- Perceived threat

**Predicting Size Misperceptions**
- Internet
- Television
- Newspapers
- Age
- Minority Status
- Female
- Perceived threat

- Russia
- Somalia

- Correct estimation
- Over-estimation
Conclusion

**GOAL**: Advance the innumeracy literature

- Not all about “how many?”
- Source misperceptions
  - Exist at statistically significant levels
  - Vary in patterned ways
Conclusion

• The individuals most threatened by immigrants view immigrant populations as...
  
  • Much larger than the reality

  • Present for reasons that differ from the reality

  • Originating in places that differ from the reality
Future research

• Ask more diverse questions about immigrant perceptions

• Consequences?

• Qualitative misperceptions outside of Finland?
• Does this happen elsewhere?

• 98 Undergraduates

• Large California university

• Which country sends the most immigrants to the US?
Innumeracy Levels Across Europe

Finland is notoriously accurate

Source: Herda (2010)
Thank you!

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