

# Immigration vs. Social Desirability Bias

Consider the following specimens of Social Desirability Bias.

1. This is my country, I would never want to live anywhere else.
2. Patriotism matters more than money!
3. I couldn't bear the thought of my children not growing up as citizens of [my country of birth].
4. This is the greatest country in the world.
5. Nothing is more important than keeping our whole family together.
6. We're nothing without our traditions.
7. Our identity matters more than gold.
8. We've got to solve our country's problems our own way.
9. We don't need foreign help to build a better country.
10. My country, right or wrong.

Claims like these are popular all over the world. No matter how awful their country is, people love to proclaim their undying devotion to folk and land. Why then have hundreds of millions of people left their countries of birth? Because the migrants don't literally believe this flowery talk. Though almost everyone voices these sentiments, actions speak louder than words. The *act* of migration says something like:

1. My country is subpar, I want to live somewhere better.
2. Money matters more than patriotism.
3. I can bear the thought of my children not growing up as [citizens of my country of birth].
4. This is not the greatest country in the world. Not even close.
5. Enjoying a higher standard of living is more important than keeping our extended family together.
6. We're going to dilute our traditions and adopt some foreign ones.
7. I would like more gold and less identity.

8. Our country isn't going to solve its problems "its own way," so I'm moving to another country that has its act together.

9. I need foreign help to build a better life.

10. My country is a major disappointment to me.

Quite a list of heresies! You could demur, "This may be what migrants say with their actions. All the people who *don't* move, however, are saying the opposite." But this overlooks the glaring reality of draconian immigration restrictions. At least a billion people would migrate if it were legal. And since migration is a drastic step, belief in these heresies must be widespread indeed.

My point: Immigrants *do* what people aren't supposed to say. They are the living embodiment of the fact that nationalism and identity politics are mostly doth-protest-too-much rhetoric rather than earnest devotion. As I've explained before:

*[Note] the stark contrast between how much people say they care about community, and how lackadaisically they try to fulfill their announced desire. I've long been shocked by the fraction of people who call themselves "religious" who can't even bother to attend a weekly ceremony or speak a daily prayer. But religious devotion is fervent compared to secular communitarian devotion. How many self-styled communitarians have the energy to attend a weekly patriotic or ethnic meeting? To spend a few hours a week watching patriotic or ethnically-themed television and movies? To utter a daily toast to their nation or people?*

The main reason people resent immigration is probably just xenophobia. But a secondary reason, plausibly, is that every immigrant is a tiny beacon of unwelcome candor. The act of immigration says, "Trying to fix my country of birth is a fool's errand. The people I grew up with are hopeless. Instead, I'm going to personally fix *my own life* by moving to a new county that works. It won't be perfect, but I'm willing to suffer for years to make the switch."

As an iconoclast myself, I love what the act of immigration says. Most people, however, hear the implied heresy and recoil.