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The European Migrant Crisis: Psychology, Conflict, and Intergroup Relations

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The European Migrant Crisis: Psychology, Conflict, and Intergroup Relations

Jasper Johnston

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Inclusion and Peaceful Societies.

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Summary

In recent years, the “European Migrant Crisis” has dominated media headlines around the world, serving as an international call to action to address the complex issues that migrants and citizens of migrant-receiving regions face. While the movement of people has often contributed to intergroup tensions across time, the strengthening of national borders and identities in the twentieth century has restricted the flow of migrants and, particularly in the past decade, made many people view the phenomenon as a threat to their countries, cultures, and livelihoods.

As the United Nations prepares its landmark Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees, it is important to consider the impact of migration through multiple lenses, so that the agreements can be as comprehensive and successful as possible. This report uses the current state of undocumented migration to Europe as a case study, analyzing it through an intergroup psychology lens. From this case study, lessons applicable to other migratory contexts can be drawn. Based on psychological theory—including theories of social identity, realistic group conflict, intergroup threat, and intergroup contact—this report makes several recommendations with the goal of ultimately reducing intergroup conflict and improving the integration of migrants into receiving societies. These recommendations include: updating European education systems’ accessibilities and curricula to reflect the new diversity, reframing the crisis both as a one of governance and political responsibility as well as a humanitarian crisis, and building and/or supporting “migrant networks” to increase access to civic and governmental institutions.

“The strengthening of national borders and identities in the twentieth century has restricted the flow of migrants and, particularly in the past decade, made many people view the phenomenon as a threat to their countries, cultures, and livelihoods.”

✦ A family cross the border fence between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, making their way on foot into central Europe to seek asylum. In 2015, more than one million fled to Europe, the large majority escaping conflict and persecution in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. © Ververidis Vasilis. Idomeni, Greece. September 2015.

Introduction

Migration from the Middle East and North Africa onto the European continent has been present for thousands of years, from the trading routes of the ancient Greeks and Romans to the refugees of the early 21st century (Kassar et al., 2014). While the movement of people has often contributed to intergroup tensions across time, the strengthening of national borders and regional identities in the 20th century has restricted the flow of migrants and, particularly in the past decade, made many Europeans view the phenomenon as a threat to their countries, cultures, and livelihoods (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). Most recently, the intercontinental migration of undocumented peoples into Europe has been termed the “European Migrant/Refugee Crisis,” as millions of people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other nearby countries have fled regional violence and instability (“Migrant crisis,” 2016).

Media and governmental policies often categorize these undocumented migrants into two groups—“economic migrants” and “refugees” [see Appendix A]. While legal definitions require strict delineations to be drawn, reality is more complex—refugees, while moving primarily due to a “well-founded fear of persecution,” also seek better lives, including new opportunities for economic embetterment and social advancement (Goodman, Sirriyeh & McMahon, 2017; Nair, 2017). In this way, whether drafting policy or

engaging in discussions regarding migration, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which socioeconomics, race, gender, culture, religion and legal status are tied to the treatment of migrants. Transnational businesspeople and diplomats who are based in multiple countries are rarely categorized as “migrants,” despite their technically falling into the broad category. The same goes for tourists or “snowbirds,” who spend cold winter months in warmer, southern destinations. Only when people of lower socioeconomic status or from a race or culture stereotypically associated with the Global South migrate into the Global North does the label of “migrant” enter the vernacular, contributing to the entrenchment of ingroup and outgroup divisions. For the purposes of this report, the term “migrant” in the European context, unless otherwise specified, will refer exclusively to undocumented migrants.

Modern undocumented migration into Europe peaked in 2015, when well over one million migrants crossed onto the continent—a large increase from around 300,000 the year before—triggering the coining of the term “crisis” and an outpouring of global media attention (Goodman et al., 2017; “Annual Risk Analysis,” 2015). In particular, images of the refugees, including the now famous photo of three-year-old Alan Kurdi dead on a Turkish beach, stirred international support, which served as a call to action to European leaders (Cole, 2017). Countries reacted differently, with responses ranging from Germany, which launched a new program to admit and settle tens-of-thousands of refugees, taking in over 150,000 asylees in 2015 alone, to the United Kingdom, which did not commit to accepting any specified number of refugees and voted in June of 2016 to remove itself from the European Union, in part in order to reduce immigration (Ostrand, 2015; “Migrant crisis,” 2016; Levy, Aslan & Bironzo, 2017). It is very likely that politics, moral beliefs, stereotypes, and existing government diversity policies influenced these responses, though the extent to which each did is unclear.

The United Nations also responded, through agencies such as the UNHCR, IOM, and OHCHR, which have worked diplomatically and on the ground to assist refugees, and the General Assembly, which hosted a Summit on Refugees and Migrants in 2016. This summit culminated in the signing of the historic New York Declaration, which made

important commitments to address the many issues migrants and refugees face, including prompting the drafting of the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees which are currently being prepared and negotiated by policy makers (“New York Declaration,” 2018). The Declaration has been criticized by numerous observers for its lack of commitments to concrete actions but is generally seen as positive diplomatic progress (Borger & Kingsley, 2016).

Despite these efforts by the United Nations, intergroup tensions have flared over the past year as acts of terror committed by extremists, who also happen to be immigrants, in England, Sweden, Germany, France, and Spain have reignited nativist fears (Fattah & Nasser, 2017). These tensions have contributed to an increase in prejudice and discrimination against minority groups—both native and immigrant—as well as to the reemergence of far-right political parties in France, Italy, Germany, and Hungary (Tartar, 2017). In order to better understand the current situation and growing intergroup tensions in Europe, so that solutions to mitigate them might be developed, it is important to grasp the psychological foundations of group formation and intergroup power differences. While the next section of this report will offer a synthesis of several theoretical psychology frameworks that are relevant to analyzing migration and intergroup tensions, it should be noted that these “theories” are grounded in rigorous scientific testing, conducted over hundreds of experiments, including field experiments which have put them to test in the real world.



✦ 1. A group of men, women and children arrive to the shores of the Greek island of Lesbos, after risking their lives crossing the treacherous Aegean Sea on a dingy from Turkey. Hundreds of people have drowned while attempting this sea crossing. © Nicolas Economou. Lesbos island, Greece. November 2015.



✦ 2. Xenophobia is one rise in the current tense political climate, marked by a surge in popularity for anti-immigrant parties and acts of hatred and intolerance towards migrants. © Alexey Skachkov



Psychological Phenomena

Social Identity Theory posits that people's "social identities" arise from their group memberships (Brown, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). In order to build self-esteem, which is an essential element of psychological wellbeing, people form and maintain groups (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). At both the group and individual levels, self-esteem is increased through intergroup discrimination because such discrimination augments one's ingroup identity (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). By extension, low self-esteem encourages intergroup discrimination (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). This theory informs the basis of understanding why the involved groups in this conflict, including the various European populations and the many subgroups within the broader "migrant" category, initially formed, as well as why Europeans might engage in discriminatory thinking and actions.

An understanding of the increase in anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe can be further informed by Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT), which asserts that "competition between groups for finite resources leads to intergroup stereotypes, antagonism, and conflict" (Schofield, 2010, p. 1; Jackson, 1993). When immigration increased dramatically, countries struggled to manage, accommodate, and integrate the masses of new people, putting strain on government resources and the labor market (Bertoli, Brücker & Moraga, 2016). In particular, smaller countries such as Hungary and Austria experienced notable shifts in their demographic compositions as a result of the predominantly young, male, and Muslim immigrants (Gløersen et al., 2016). This visible change, combined with the media's portrayal of the crisis, increased the salience of group differences, exacerbating fears of competition for the limited available resources. This

phenomenon's effect is illustrated by news headlines such as "By 2060 There Will Be No Germany As We Know It" and "Open door to migrants makes Germany terror hub of Europe," which speak to the fears of many preexisting European residents who are worried that they will be displaced (Sputnik, 2017; Pancevski, 2017). Craig and Richeson (2017) provide evidence that making white majority groups aware of a looming demographic shift, that could put them in the minority over time, increases the majority's fears of discrimination. This is consistent with RGCT, as well as Intergroup Threat Theory, which suggests that members of a group experience intergroup threat when they perceive that an outgroup could be positioned to cause them harm (Stephan, Ybarra & Morrison, 2009; Riek, Mania & Gaertner, 2006). Bello (2013; 2017) explores these perceived group threats in a migrant context and finds that they indeed strongly influence attitudes towards immigrants, although their impact can be controlled by the presence of intercultural values.

A central aspect of the European Migrant Crisis, that ties together all of the countries involved, is the media's role in perpetuating negative stereotypes and implicitly prejudiced beliefs. By often framing the situation as a "migrant crisis," the media has set up a dichotomy between "deserving" refugees and "undeserving" migrants, exacerbating ethnic and cultural fears (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Nair, 2017). Furthermore, by branding the situation a "crisis," without explicitly clarifying what constitutes the "crisis," the media has fueled misguided beliefs

✦ A protester at a pro-migrant demonstration in London. Organised by the refugee solidarity group, London2Calais, the march called for more welcoming policies for refugees. At the time, thousands of people, mostly of non-European origin, were living in the so-called 'Calais Jungle', a makeshift camp in France.

© Dinendra Haria. Parliament Square, Westminster, London, UK. March 2016.

that the crisis is one of demographics, wherein Europeans face an existential crisis amidst the influx of migrants of different ethnicities, as opposed to the alternative framing that the crisis is one of humanitarianism, wherein thousands of people are dying while trying to escape civil wars and conflict. These framings explicitly and implicitly feed into negative stereotypes of the migrant populations being undeserving of aid and sympathy.

Even when Europeans do interact with refugees who run counter to their stereotypes, many will engage in subtyping, a “process by which group members who disconfirm, or are at odds with, the group stereotype are mentally clustered together and essentially set aside as ‘exceptions to the rule’” (Maurer, Park & Rothbart, 1995, p. 812). This is in opposition to the subgrouping process of stereotyping, which allows individuals who disconfirm group stereotypes to still be included in groups with which they share other stereotypical traits (Maurer et al., 1995). Consistent with the findings of Maurer et al. (1995), subtyping contributes to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and intergroup tensions in Europe.

While subtyping and negative framing effects may stand in the way of intergroup conciliation, Intergroup Contact Theory (ICT) provides insight into how intergroup tensions could be resolved (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). First developed by Gordon Allport, ICT states that, under certain conditions, positive intergroup interactions between group members can reduce prejudice and discrimination

(Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The theory has been described as one of the most effective forms of mitigating intergroup conflict and has four conditions: equal status, intergroup cooperation, and common goals between the groups, and the support of the law, authorities, and customs (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Despite the potential for intergroup contact to reduce the growing tensions, these conditions are not currently present in most intergroup interactions in Europe, hindering progress towards the attenuation of intergroup conflict and the integration of recent migrants into European society.

There are several potential reasons why the conditions for ICT are lacking. First, due to systemic racial, socioeconomic, and religious hierarchies, equal status between groups is very difficult to obtain. Second, the absence of equal status is perpetuated by a lack of full support of the laws and customs, which often force refugees to remain second-class citizens (Baker, 2017). Third, while the involved groups all likely have common goals, including the desire to live in peace and prosperity, many of the discussed psychological phenomena—such as intergroup threat theory, subtyping, and realistic group conflict theory—prevent individuals from realizing these commonalities. From these challenges, this report proposes three policy recommendations that integrate intergroup psychology to ultimately build the conditions for positive intergroup contact to occur: updating European education systems’ accessibilities and curricula to reflect the new diversity, reframing the crisis both as a one of governance and political responsibility as well as a humanitarian crisis, and building and/or supporting “migrant networks” to increase access to civic and governmental institutions.

❖ 1. A migrant is registered at a reception centre in Italy. In 2015, the majority of arrivals to Italy were from Africa, mostly Eritrea, Nigeria and Somalia. From January to April 2015, about 1600 migrants died on the route from Libya to Lampedusa, making it the deadliest migrant route in the world. © Mike Dotta. Settimo Torinese, Turin, Italy. July 2015

❖ 2. A girl in a makeshift camp in Piraeus port in Greece. In March 2016, the EU-Turkey agreement led to the closure of borders and ceased free movement of people through countries in Europe, leaving tens of thousands stuck in Greece. © Alexandros Michailidis. Piraeus, Greece. April 6, 2016





Policy recommendations

Educational Reform

Sociologists and psychologists agree that, in its positive form, assimilation is an essential step that enables immigrants to thrive in new countries (Skerry, 2000). Education is a vital part of the assimilation process, spreading cultural knowledge, language skills, and a common foundation of understanding. Currently, many young migrants lack access to education in Europe, while others are too old for traditional systems (Welters, 2017). Language barriers and limited resources further hinder attempts to integrate these new populations into European systems, which contributes to the lack of the “equal status” condition of Intergroup Contact Theory. For these reasons, it is recommended that governments, nonprofits, and civic institutions work together to expedite the integration of immigrants into the education system—both as teachers and as students. Additionally, in line with the recommendations of Bello (2013), curricula across the European Union should be reformed to include more favorable, or at least balanced, information about refugees and migrants more broadly, including why they migrate and what they contribute to society. This curriculum reform could be augmented by simultaneous efforts to educate the adult public, through both the news media and social media. These changes would be a first step in building grassroots equality, which is an important component of both intergroup contact and the implementation of the next two proposed recommendations.

Reframing the Crisis

As previously discussed, the framing of the current migration patterns onto the European continent contributes to intergroup tensions and hinders progress towards constructive discourse regarding the issues that the refugees, and the continent as a whole, face. In order to address this, a campaign should

be mobilized that aims to reframe the “crisis” amongst the public as not a demographic or economic crisis but as a humanitarian crisis that can be solved in a way that is beneficial to both refugees in need of asylum and to the European population. Research has consistently shown that immigrants strengthen economies and even can reduce crime rates (Kubrin et al., 2017), and these facts should be moved to the forefront of the discussion. As a first step, it is important for the United Nations to acknowledge that the situation is also a crisis of governance and political responsibility and treat it as such, in both its policy and rhetoric. This would both facilitate the UN’s enacting of policies that ensure the rights of migrants and send a clear message to governments that many of the issues that exist can, and should, be solved at the state level. A recent paper by Clemens et al. (2018) supports this, offering solid insights into the positive effects policy efforts that constructively shape immigration and immigrant integration can have when states are willing to take on the responsibility of implementing them.

Building Migrant Networks

Finally, networks of migrants should be built and supported to provide migrants from all backgrounds with a voice through which they could influence civil society and governments. Pescinski (2016) proposes such a movement, arguing that while refugees are often treated as “passive beneficiaries of aid,” they are, of course, humans with the same fundamental rights as the rest of society. In order to change this perception, Pescinski (2016) points to the benefits of a political movement

✦ A refugee works as a skilled labourer in Istanbul, Turkey. Many migrants from Africa arrive to Europe in the hope of finding work and an income. However, finding work can be difficult for unauthorized migrants and those who have entered illegally so do not have correct immigration papers. © answer5. Istanbul, Turkey. May 2018.

of refugee empowerment and advocates the benefits of the International Committee of Refugees—a recently established grassroots coalition of refugees and allies. Based on intergroup psychology, the ideas behind this growing network seem promising. Ultimately, this movement should be aimed at ensuring that the migrant populations feel heard, allowing them to engage in perspective-giving, an act demonstrated to positively change intergroup attitudes (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). In order for this to be fully effective, Europeans would have to be open to engaging in perspective-taking, in which they would actively consider the subjective experiences and mental states of members of the outgroup (Todd & Galinsky, 2014). This would be facilitated by the previous recommendations of educational reform and situational reframing, both of which would make preexisting European residents more open to engaging in perspective-taking. Furthermore, should this movement become firmly established, it has the potential to address the current deficiencies in all of the conditions of ICT, building the status of migrant populations and providing them with a realistic chance to highlight the existence of common goals and the potential for cooperation while lobbying for the support of the law and lawmakers.

✦ Syrian refugees study in a classroom in Istanbul. It is estimated half of all school-aged Syrian children living in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon do not have access to formal education. © Tolga Sezgin. Istanbul, Turkey. March 2015.



“Education is a vital part of the assimilation process, spreading cultural knowledge, language skills, and a common foundation of understanding.”

Conclusion

Although these recommendations are theoretically effective, to what extent are they practical? History would suggest that these changes will not be rapidly implemented but do have the potential to be unfolded over time (Giugni, McAdam & Tilly, 1999). Altering the social fabric of a community, let alone thousands of communities across a continent, takes time and concerted efforts on multiple fronts. Education is a strong place to start, shifting perceptions, building equality, and developing a shared vocabulary—all of which can facilitate positive intergroup contact and effective discussions around the issues which the various groups involved face. Reframing the issue and building a movement to empower migrant communities through the establishment of migrant networks are further effective steps that could help reduce stereotypes and intergroup conflict.

The United Nations' Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees are promising steps in the right direction, especially if signatory states follow through on the aspirations which the Compacts address. At the time of writing, the Compacts are still in the drafting stage, and could further be enhanced by acknowledging some of the challenges psychological biases pose to the effective implementation of pro-migration and integration efforts. While policy, informed by historical practice and theory, can positively shape the migration landscape, ultimately it will be up to the people and groups directly involved to build conditions in which coexistence is possible.

“While policy... can positively shape the migration landscape, ultimately it will be up to the people and groups directly involved to build conditions in which coexistence is possible.”

❖ 1. Riot police officers stand during an operation to evacuate the refugees from Victoria Square in Athens, Greece. Many families, even those with young children who had fled war and persecution in their home countries, were forced to wait for over a year in Greece until they were formally offered asylum and resettled in a different European country. © Alexandros Michailidis. Athens, Greece. October 2015.

❖ 2. Child refugees from Syria play in a refugee camp in Turkey. Their hometown of Kobani endured years of battle, siege and destruction. A few months prior to this photo being taken, hundreds of civilians were killed in bomb attacks in Kobani, and the remaining residents cleared from the area. Now, only a fraction of homes are even remotely habitable. © Orlok. Sanliurfa, Turkey. October 2015.



Appendix: Defining Migrants and Refugees

According to the United Nations' Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees Article 1A(2), a "refugee" is a person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" ("Glossary on Migration," 2011).

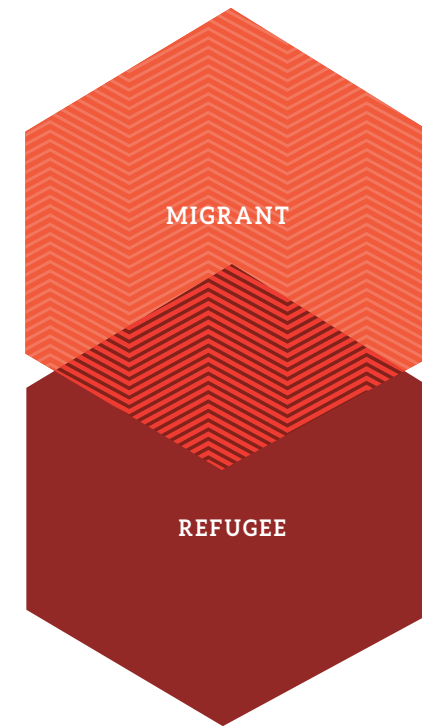
What constitutes a "migrant" however is less defined. The International Organization for Migration defines a migrant as any individual who has moved across an international border, regardless of purpose or intentionality ("Glossary on Migration," 2011). This broad definition has led to a lack of clarity around where the line between migrant and refugee falls. Combined with the rigidity of the legal definition of "refugee," this lack of clarity has also contributed to the forming of a false dichotomy in the media and in many pockets of European society between "deserving refugees" and "undeserving migrants" (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016).

As Nair (2017) writes, while legal definitions require strict delineations to be drawn, reality is more complex—refugees, while moving primarily due to a "well-founded fear of persecution," also seek better lives, including new opportunities for economic embetterment and social advancement. In this way, they are not substantially different from migrants who move for similar reasons, less the fear of persecution. Although they may not have definitive evidence of active persecution against them, many migrants are the victims of stagnant social and economic opportunities which, over time, can be just as debilitating as any tyrannical regime.

Similarly, it is important to recognize the extent to which socioeconomics, race, gender, culture, religion, and legal status are tied to the treatment of migrants. Transnational businesspeople and diplomats who are based in multiple countries are rarely categorized as "migrants," despite their technically falling into the broad category. The same goes for tourists who spend their vacations abroad. Only when people of lower socioeconomic status or from a race or culture stereotypically associated with the Global South migrate into the Global North does the label of "migrant" enter the vernacular, contributing to the entrenchment of ingroup and outgroup divisions.

The harmful anti-migrant rhetoric that creates a strict delineation between "migrants" and "refugees" forms what I refer to as the "Overlapping Migrant/Refugee Model." In this model, refugees and undocumented migrants

Overlapping migrant/ refugee model

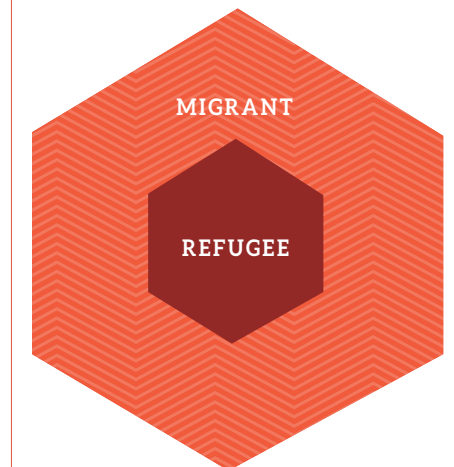


are largely viewed as distinct identity groups, defined by the laws and societal practices which govern them. While the model allows for some overlap between the two categories, it is not an accurate representation of how the two categories should be viewed because, on the whole, refugees have largely the same underlying interests as undocumented migrants more broadly and are only distinguished by a set of circumstances (proof of being in well-founded fear of persecution) that create a legal delineation. Despite this shortcoming, this model is implicitly or explicitly used

in many media narratives (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016) and contributes to a lack of governmental and societal willingness to comprehensively address there many serious issues which undocumented migrants face.

On the other hand, in the "Nested Migrant/Refugee Model" refugees are viewed as a subset of the broader undocumented migrant group, reflecting the legal distinction that turns migrants into refugees. While it is not perfect, I argue that the adoption of this model as the primary way of viewing the relationship between refugees and migrants would help reduce the perceived distinction between the two groups and increase the likelihood of the adoption of a humanist approach to the treatment of migrants and refugees, contributing to a decrease in "us versus them" mentalities.

Nested migrant/ refugee model



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Abbreviations

ICT: Intergroup Contact Theory
IOM: International Organization for Migration
UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
OHCHR: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
RGCT: Realistic Group Conflict Theory

This report aims to contribute towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular focus towards:

- **SDG 4** - Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- **SDG 16** - Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
- **SDG 17** - Partnerships for the Goals: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

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