Case Report

Can they ever be one of us? Perceived cultural malleability of refugees and policy support in host nations☆

Nur Soylu Yalcinkaya[a,*], Nyla R. Branscombe[a], Fabian Gebauer[b], Claudia Niedlich[c], Nader H. Hakim[a]

[a] *The University of Kansas, United States*
[b] *The University of Bamberg, Germany*
[c] *The University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany*

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ABSTRACT

Public support for accepting refugees into Western countries may depend on their perceived cultural malleability—the possibility of cultural change and adaptation. We hypothesize that members of host nations will perceive child refugees as having greater potential for cultural malleability than adults, which, in turn, will positively predict their support for acceptance of refugees into their country. In Study 1, participants reported greater perceived cultural malleability in response to images of child Syrian refugees (compared to those of adults with explicit markers of ethnic/religious identity, or groups of refugees), which positively predicted policy support. This pattern was replicated using American (Study 2a) and German (Study 2b) samples, and even when adult refugees were depicted without explicit markers of identity in the images. We discuss the theoretical implications of our findings for research on essentialism and intergroup helping, and implications for fostering inclusive public opinion regarding immigration.

1. Introduction

The world is facing a major refugee crisis due to ongoing conflicts such as the civil war in Syria. Public opinion in Europe and the United States is divided; some consider accepting refugees into their country as a humanitarian duty, whereas others stand firmly against a possible influx of refugees. Media portrayals of refugees can guide public opinion in either direction. Images of children in the media have a particularly strong impact on the public, as in the case of Aylan Kurdi, a deceased toddler washed ashore after the sinking of a boat full of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, captured in a globally sensational image (e.g., Smith, 2015), among many others. Indeed, many campaigns focus on children to raise donations for refugees (e.g., "Save the Children"). However, the psychological process underlying the effects of exposure to images and stories of child refugees remains unknown. Furthermore, it is unclear whether such exposure makes a difference in terms of people's responses to the refugee crisis (e.g., policy support). In this paper, we examine whether exposure to child images (compared to adults or groups of refugees) generates greater support for the acceptance of refugees into a Western host nation, due to the perceived potential for cultural change and adaptation associated with children.

Research on intergroup helping based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that people are less likely to help outgroup than ingroup members when the social identity that distinguishes them from the victims is salient (e.g., Levine & Manning, 2013; Levine & Thompson, 2004). Although majority members of host nations are likely to consider refugees as outgroup members, they may perceive differences among specific members of this outgroup. For instance, they may perceive some outgroup members as having greater potential to adapt to the host nation's culture over time and become "one of us" compared to other members who may be more likely to remain cultural "others" in the long run, which may have implications for helping.

Such perceptions concerning refugees' potential to adapt to the host society may be formed through exposure to representations of refugees (or immigrants) in the media, which influence public opinion especially during periods of intense levels of immigration (e.g., Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009). Whereas positive representations of immigrants can help counter perceptions of immigration as problematic (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009), negative representations of immigrants' cultural values can evoke negative attitudes toward

immigrants among majority members of the host nation (Maio, Esses, & Bell, 1994). In addition to the valence of representations, we propose that cues such as the age of refugees represented in the media may convey information about their cultural characteristics and shape people's general stance regarding immigration policies. Specifically, people may perceive child refugees from Syria (a Muslim- and Arab-majority nation) as having greater potential for cultural change and adaptation to a Western host nation than older adults. We argue that such perceived cultural malleability on the part of refugees can positively shape people's stance on policies regarding the acceptance of Syrian refugees into their country.

1.1. Essentialism and perceived cultural malleability

Lay beliefs about the fixed or malleable character of humans and their attributes (*implicit theories*, Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995) have implications for perception of groups (Hong, Levy, & Chiu, 2001; Levy, Plaks, Hong, Chiu, & Dweck, 2001). For instance, beliefs in fixed and rigid human attributes are associated with greater stereotyping (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998). Extending work on implicit theories, research on essentialism focuses on lay beliefs in underlying natures that constitute and differentiate social categories (e.g., Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000, 2002). Essentialism entails the tendency to understand social categories as expressions of discrete, fixed, natural, uniform, and defining characteristics that are shared by all members, and are informative about them (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Haslam et al., 2000, 2002). People may understand the *essence* of an ethnic or racial group in genetic/biological terms (e.g., Williams & Eberhardt, 2008) or in terms of cultural characteristics (e.g., Hong, Chao, & No, 2009; Morning, 2009). The latter understanding reflects *cultural essentialism*, or the belief that cultural patterns typical of an ethnic group fundamentally shape its members (Verkuyten, 2003). Based on cultural essentialism, different ethnic groups have distinct cultures, and the cultural boundaries between these groups are rigid and impermeable (Hong et al., 2009; Verkuyten, 2003). Extending previous research, which has identified fixedness, or lack of malleability, as an important dimension of essentialism (e.g., Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Bastian, Bain, & Kashima, 2006; Haslam et al., 2000), cultural essentialism also incorporates the belief that there is no room for the cultural characteristics of people (or groups) to change.

Attributing such essential cultural characteristics to ethnic groups plays an important role in attitudes toward immigrants and their integration into the society. For instance, if majority members of a host nation perceive an immigrant group as wanting to preserve their distinct culture, they may show less support for their integration into the society, especially if they are high in prejudice toward that group (Zagefka, Tip, González, Brown, & Cinnirella, 2012). In contrast, if the immigrant group signals that they wish to adopt the host culture, majority members tend to support their integration more (Zagefka et al., 2012). To the extent that majority members hold essentialist beliefs, they perceive cultural adaptation of immigrants as highly desirable, but at the same time, as not feasible (Zagefka, Nigbur, González, & Tip, 2013). This discrepancy in beliefs fosters high levels of prejudice against immigrants (Zagefka et al., 2013). When endorsed by dominant group members, cultural essentialism also relates to greater rejection of multiculturalist ideologies (Verkuyten & Brug, 2004), and greater support for anti-immigration policies (Verkuyten, 2003).

How do people come to attribute essential cultural characteristics to ethnic outgroups? Exposure to representations of individual members can shape perceptions of cultural characteristics of ethnic groups as a whole. Observers may use cues such as age of refugees in media representations to infer their potential for cultural malleability. For instance, people may consider adult members of an ethnic outgroup to have already been shaped definitively by a culture that is dissimilar to theirs, which has determined the kind of people they are. However, young children may not be considered full-blown members of an

outgroup yet; thus, their cultural values and beliefs may change as they continue the process of socialization in a different cultural context (i.e., a host society). Inferences about cultural malleability as a function of age of represented members of a group, we argue, can influence support for policies concerning the whole group.

1.2. The present research

Integrating immigrants into the existing social order is a major challenge that host nations face (Verkuyten, 2004). Cultural essentialist beliefs may play a key role in the responses of majority members of host societies toward immigrants, as well as refugees. In our studies, we conceptualize cultural essentialist beliefs in terms of perceived potential for cultural change and adaptation attributed to an outgroup (i.e., refugees). We build on research showing that majority members may be more welcoming to refugees to the extent that they can foresee their cultural adaptation (Zagefka et al., 2012); we further propose that observers may perceive child refugees as having greater potential for cultural change and adaptation. Therefore, exposure to child refugees can challenge broader essentialist perceptions of refugees as a uniform group of cultural "others" with fixed characteristics. Specifically, we hypothesize that (H1) exposure to child (as opposed to adult or a group of) refugees will lead to higher *perceived cultural malleability* (i.e., expected cultural change and potential for cultural adaptation). We further propose a mediation hypothesis (H2), such that higher perceived cultural malleability will, in turn, positively predict support for acceptance of refugees into a host country.

A possible alternative mechanism for the proposed relationship between exposure to child refugees and policy support is through perceived threat. It is possible for observers to consider child (compared to adult) refugees as less threatening. Based on integrated threat theory, realistic threats comprise perceived economic, political, or physical threats to the well-being of the ingroup; symbolic threats comprise concerns about the morals, values, and beliefs of outgroups that challenge the worldview of the ingroup (e.g., Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Stephan, Renfro, Esses, Stephan, and Martin (2005) have documented that a combination of realistic threats (e.g., that immigrants would take away jobs) and symbolic threats (e.g., that immigrants hold values that contradict core values of the host nation) can lead to negative attitudes toward immigrants. Perceived symbolic threats are associated with prejudice toward culturally different immigrants such as Muslims in Europe (González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008; McLaren, 2003). Furthermore, perceived threats to the dominant identity due to an expected increase in the percentage of immigrants in a society can foster intentions to engage in collective action against immigration (Shepherd, Fasoli, Pereira, & Branscombe, 2018). Exposure to child refugees may alleviate such threat-based responses to policies regarding refugees.

Another possible mechanism for the proposed relationship between exposure to child refugees and policy support is through emotions. Exposure to the suffering of young children may evoke strong emotions among observers. Collective emotions such as angst, anger, and fear relate to tendencies to take action against improving the living conditions of immigrants (Shepherd et al., 2018). Whereas negative emotions such as anger diminish support for assistance and rights for asylum seekers, positive emotions such as sympathy can foster support for such policies (Verkuyten, 2004). If exposure to child refugees evokes strong emotions such as empathy, this may play a positive role in policy support.

Based on the relevant literature, we included perceived threat and emotions in our hypothesized mediation model, to examine whether the mediating role of perceived cultural malleability in the relationship between exposure to representations of refugees and policy support remains significant even when these additional potential mediators are included. We present a test of our hypotheses across three experimental studies using American and German samples.