THE OPENNESS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS TOWARDS SYRIAN REFUGEES IN GERMANY

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In our research, involving 100 high school students from Germany between 10 and 17 years of age, children and adolescents were generally very open towards integrating Syrian refugees in their peer activities – with girls being even more inclusive than boys. We used hypothetical scenarios in which adolescents were asked if they would include refugee peers versus local peer in their leisure time peer group activities or not. In the first part of the study, we identified host country language skills as a key element for positive social integration of refugee youths in Germany. In part two of the study, we revealed an interesting asymmetry between youths' own decisions and what they think their group would do: whereas the youth themselves were very inclusive towards Syrian peers, they expected their group to prefer German peers and expected them to less likely choose a Syrian peer for their leisure time activities.

Dans le cadre de notre recherche, à laquelle ont participé 100 élèves allemands âgés de 10 à 17 ans, les enfants et les adolescents étaient généralement très ouverts à l'intégration des réfugiés syriens dans leurs activités avec leurs pairs – les filles étant encore plus ouvertes que les garçons. Nous avons utilisé des scénarios hypothétiques dans lesquels il était demandé aux adolescents s'ils incluraient ou non leurs pairs réfugiés par rapport à leurs pairs locaux dans leurs activités de loisirs en groupe. Dans la première partie de l'étude, nous avons identifié les compétences linguistiques du pays d'accueil comme un élément clé pour une intégration sociale positive des jeunes réfugiés en Allemagne. Dans la deuxième partie de l'étude, nous avons révélé une asymétrie intéressante entre les décisions des jeunes eux-mêmes et ce qu'ils pensent que leur groupe ferait : alors que les jeunes eux-mêmes étaient très inclusifs envers leurs pairs syriens, ils s'attendaient à ce que leur groupe préfère les pairs allemands et s'attendaient à ce qu'ils choisissent moins souvent un pair syrien pour leurs activités de loisirs.

Since the start of the war in Syria in 2011, more than a million refugees have crossed into Europe, with Germany attracting the highest number among European countries (BAMF 2018; UNHCR 2017). As a result of this influx, the integration of refugees has become an increasingly important issue in Germany as well as in many other European countries. However, it is important to note that integration is not a unidirectional process requiring effort only on the part of the refugees. Integration is a reciprocal process of mutual accommodation between the incoming refugees and members of the host society (Berry et al. 2006). The members of the host society need to be open to integration and welcoming toward the refugees (Berry 2011). Thus, the attitudes of the Germans toward refugees are crucial for integration. If we want to understand the experiences of refugees, we need to find out more about how open Germans are toward including refugees in their social interactions. This

is an important topic as research has documented how harmful social exclusion can be for one's health and well-being (Buhs 2005; Buhs and Ladd 2001; Juvonen and Gross 2005; Rutland and Killen 2015).

Almost one third of the refugees in Germany are children and youth (UNICEF 2019), with individuals from Syria representing the largest group (Statistisches Bundesamt 2019). Children and adolescents from refugee families deserve special attention. Having been forced to leave their country, their homes, their friends and families, they face a particularly challenging situation. Many of them have endured traumatic experiences in their home country or on their way to the new host country, and have been exposed to various psychological stressors (Ruf, Schauer, and Elbert 2010). They have left behind everything they knew and have to adapt to a new environment and culture. The expectation is that they will smoothly integrate in a new society with new values, norms and perspectives. Not least among these expectations is having to learn a new language. Given this special situation, youth from refugee families can be considered to be an at-risk population (Gavranidou, Niemiec, Magg, and Rosner 2008). Thus, being accepted by others and belonging might be particularly important to refugee youth and social exclusion might have an even greater impact on them than on other groups. Further, social exclusion during the acculturation process is a significant acculturative stressor, making integration more difficult (Verkuyten and Thijs 2002; Ward, Furnham, and Bochner 2005).

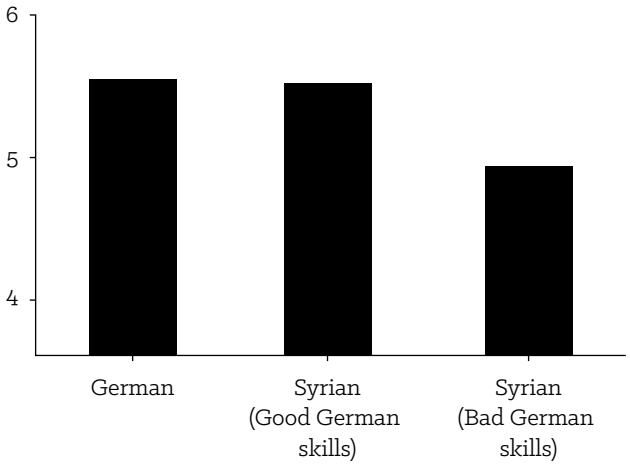
According to the Child Rights International Network, many refugee children face social exclusion and marginalization when coming to a new country (Child Rights International Network, Article 22). Research has shown that children and adolescents who are exposed to social exclusion experience anxiety, low self-esteem, health and behavioral problems, as well as difficulties in interpersonal relationships (Araujo and Borrell 2006; Eisenberger, Lieberman, and Williams 2003; Gazelle and Druhen 2009; Murray-Close and Ostrov, 2009; Sanders-Phillips et al. 2009; Tummala-Narra, Alegria, and Chen 2012). Further, facing social exclusion can have a negative impact on academic engagement and achievement (Buhs, Ladd, and Herald 2006).

Thus, in order to improve the situation of refugee youth, one aim should be to support them and provide opportunities to build friendships with local peers in order to foster positive connections and develop relationships in school and in their host society (Marshall et al. 2016). However, in order to realize this goal, we need to know more about the attitudes of the youth of the host society, i.e., Germany. We need to know how open German children and adolescents are towards including refugee youth into their social and peer interactions, and which factors might have an impact on their inclusivity.

OPENNESS TOWARDS REFUGEES AND THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

In our research[1], involving 100 high school students from Germany between 10 and 17 years of age, children and adolescents were generally very open toward integrating Syrian refugees in their peer activities – with girls being even more inclusive than boys. We used hypothetical scenarios in which adolescents were asked if they would include a peer in their leisure time peer group activity or not. This peer was either a German native, a Syrian refugee with good German skills, or a Syrian refugee with bad German skills. Participants demonstrated a strong tendency to inclusion as they were generally willing to include the German peer as well as the Syrian peers in their activities. However, German language skills were a key element for inclusion: the Syrian peer with good German skills was more likely to being included than the Syrian peer with bad Germans skills. That is, children's and adolescents' inclusivity was based on language skills rather than status as German native or a refugee (see figure 1). Adolescents did not differ in their inclusivity towards a German peer and a Syrian peer with good German skills. In contrast, a Syrian peer with bad German skills was less likely to be included in peer interactions than the other two.

FIGURE 1: YOUTHS' LIKELIHOOD TO INCLUDE PEERS BASED ON ORIGIN AND LANGUAGE SKILLS (HIGHER VALUES REPRESENT A HIGHER LIKELIHOOD OF INCLUSION)



1 A full description of the procedural details and a thorough description of all analyses of this study can be found in Beißert, Hanna, Gönültaş, Secil, and Mulvey, Kelly Lynn (2019). Social Inclusion of Refugee and Native Peers Among Adolescents: It is the Language that Matters! *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12518

This implies that host country language skills are a key to positive social integration for refugee youths. Whereas prior research already documented the crucial role of language skills for integration in terms of academic achievement (Duong et al. 2016; Stanat and Christensen 2006) or labor market entry (Auer 2018; Esser 2006), our research demonstrated the significance of language skills for integration in terms of social interactions and for inclusion of refugees in peer groups.

There are several reasons why language is crucial for social inclusion and on a societal level for integration. First of all, language is a medium for communication which enables comprehension between people within a society. As many refugees do not have host country language skills upon arrival, language barriers can lead to difficulties in social interactions and communication (McBrien 2005) and might result in social exclusion. If refugees want to get in contact with people of the host society, it is very helpful to speak the national language in order to communicate properly (Esser 2006). Thus, for refugee youth, language is an important tool to foster positive contact and friendships with majority youths. Having better contact with peers, in turn, promotes engagement of refugee youth in the host culture and supports the development of better language skills (Berry et al. 2006).

Further, language is a symbol for relatedness or dissimilarity and thus reflects a marker of group membership (Kinzler 2013; Kinzler et al. 2009; Esser 2006). That means that we perceive people who speak another language as different to us. And prior research demonstrated that people who are perceived as different from others are more likely to be rejected (Killen and Rutland 2011). In other words, language reflects a meaningful intergroup category (Kinzler 2013; Kinzler et al. 2009) which can be a basis for exclusion (Mulvey, Boswell and Niehaus 2018). Speaking a different language may heighten the perceived difference or dissimilarity between peers, creating a greater sense of their "otherness" and decreasing their social acceptance. In line with this, most theories of immigrant integration assume that exposure to the host country's language facilitates integration as immigrants become more similar to the culture via language (Alba and Nee 2009).

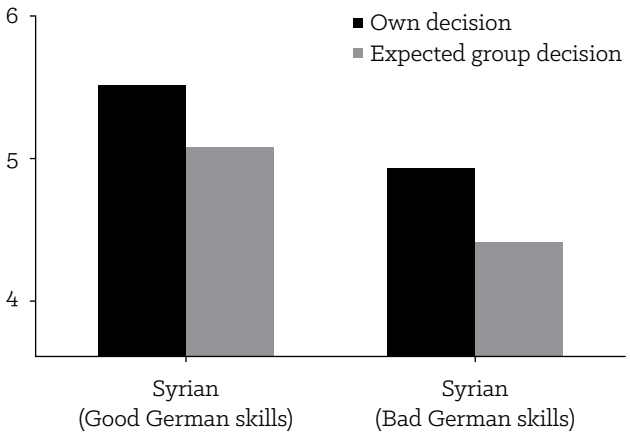
So, this is once again a strong argument that integration programs should focus on the immediate acquisition of language skills of the respective host country. As soon as possible after arriving in the new country, refugees should participate in language classes. Further, they should be provided with opportunities to get into contact with local peers. For instance, tandem or buddy programs could be a good option for creating positive opportunities for contact between refugees and locals. Thereby, we can make use of the bidirectional relationship between language and intergroup contact (i.e., meaningful interaction between the refugee youth and their local peers) and interethnic friendship (Wright and Tropp 2005). For refugee youth, language is an important tool to foster positive contact and friendships with peers form the host society. Having better contact with peers, in turn, promotes engagement of refugee youth in the host culture and supports the development of better language skills (Berry et al. 2006).

THE ROLE OF GROUP DYNAMICS

Besides the key role of language skills for inclusion, we must not forget that group dynamics become more important with age. Social inclusion and exclusion and expectations of what others think become increasingly meaningful (Killen and Rutland 2011). Thus, it is not enough to focus on children's and adolescents' own opinions and attitudes when investigating social inclusion and exclusion of refugee peers. It is also important to understand what local youth expect their peer group to think or to do in a specific situation because these expectations might impact children's and adolescents' own decisions and behavior.

In order to explore adolescents' perceptions of their group's inclusivity, we asked participants to rate their own responses to including refugees and also to consider what their peers would do if they were making decisions about including refugee youth. Interestingly, adolescents expected their peer group to be less inclusive towards the Syrian peers than they themselves would be (see figure 2). This represents an interesting asymmetry between youths' own decisions and what they think their group would do. Expecting your group to be less inclusive than you would be has concerning implications for one's own behavior, as group norms are critically important for shaping group inclusivity (McGuire, Rutland and Nesdale 2015; Nesdale et al. 2010). In other words, even though adolescents may desire to be inclusive, it is possible that their expectations of their group's desires may inhibit them from actually engaging in inclusive behavior.

FIGURE 2: YOUTHS' OWN INCLUSION DECISIONS AND WHAT THEY EXPECT THEIR GROUP TO DO (HIGHER VALUES REPRESENT A HIGHER LIKELIHOOD OF INCLUSION)



In order to find out more about this asymmetry and investigate it more directly, we presented the participating children and adolescents another hypothetical scenario. In this scenario, participants had to decide which one of two peers they would include in their peer activities – a German peer or a Syrian refugee peer. Again, we asked them about their own choice and about what they expect their group to choose. And again, we found this interesting asymmetry: whereas the youth themselves were very inclusive towards their Syrian peers, they expected their group to prefer the German peer and expected them to less likely choose their Syrian peers. This finding is very important as group pressure is a very strong issue for children and adolescents and as a result youths' expectations about their groups' attitudes can have a strong impact on their own decisions and behavior (Brown 2013). If children or adolescents in their daily lives expect their friends not to be willing to include refugee peers in their social interactions, this could also prevent them from behaving in inclusive ways. Thus, integration programs should not only focus on the refugees. It would also be very helpful to work with the local youth in order to encourage them to do what they think is right, no matter what they think their group would do. Further programs for the prevention of group based exclusion should raise the issue of integration and inclusion in open conversations in class. This can help children and adolescents understand that most of their peers would be very inclusive towards refugees, too, and that hence there is no need to expect their peer groups to be less inclusive. Interventions should aim to help children and adolescents to share their opinions without being afraid of group pressure. If they find out that most of them are very open towards refugees they don't have to "hide" their true beliefs in real life interactions. This is an issue that should really be considered when talking about prevention of exclusion and supporting inclusion in intergroup contexts. Other factors that might promote inclusion and thus should be taken into account for prevention and intervention are school norms of inclusion (Nipedal, Nesdale, & Killen, 2010), individual variation in empathy (Nesdale, Griffiths, Durkin, & Maass, 2005) and parental intergroup attitudes (Degner & Dalege, 2013).

CONCLUSION

In sum, this line of research is documenting a few key findings. German youth are invested in including their refugee peers, but they perceive language barriers to be a challenge when seeking ways to be inclusive. Further, German youth may not always accurately judge their own local peers' inclusivity. While our sample was universally inclusive, they also expected their peers to be much less inclusive. This discrepancy suggests that more work should be done to highlight the inclusive nature of German youth and to help promote open dialogue about the benefits of intergroup friendships and building connections with refugee peers. Although the findings of this study centered on German youth, inclusion of refugee youth is a global concern and the results of this study can be used to consider ways to promote successful integration of refugee youth in diverse contexts.

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