

Summary

The Relationship of Ethnic and Political Identification and Perceived Threat Level with Negative Attitudes towards Syrian Refugees

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Influenced by the uprising that started in December 2010 in Tunisia with a discourse against the oppressive regime, a civil war broke out in Syria which resulted in more than 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees seeking shelter in Turkey since 2011 due to fear of their own safety (Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management, 2021). This sudden and unorganized mass migration has caused tension between the local people and the Syrian refugees in Turkey, creating an environment for intergroup conflicts. It is well known by the literature that attitude of local people towards refugees has a major role on the mentioned intergroup relationships as well as on the success of refugees' adaptation into society. The purpose of this study is to identify the negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey and to examine the mediating role of the perceived threat caused by the refugees in the relationship of ethnic and political identification and negative attitudes. In other words, unlike the literature that focuses on direct relationships, this study tests indirect relationships using a structural equation model testing. In this context, the latent variable named "negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees" involves negative emotions, negative stereotypes and quality of contact; the latent variable named "ethnic and political identification" involves identifying oneself with Turkish identity and right-wing political orientation; the latent variable named "perceived threat due to Syrian refugees" involves realistic and symbolic threats. The hypotheses are as follows:

The rise of ethnic and political identification would increase the perceived threat due to Syrian refugees in Turkey, and this would strengthen negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees. To be more precise, those who identify themselves as Turkish and politically right-wing oriented would perceive higher levels of realistic and

symbolic threats due to Syrian refugees living in Turkey, thus increasing their negative emotions and negative stereotypes against the Syrian refugees and reducing their quality of contact with them.

In addition to the aforementioned indirect relationship, it is expected that there should be a direct relationship between ethnic and political identification and negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees. The rise of ethnic and political identification would strengthen negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees. To be more precise, those who identify themselves as Turkish and politically right-wing oriented would have stronger negative emotions and negative stereotypes against and a reduced quality of contact with Syrian refugees.

Method

Sampling and Data Collection Tools

The study had a total of 526 university students at undergraduate level. Of these participants, 368 (70%) of them are female, while 158 (30%) are male. The age range of the sample is 18 to 33 years with a mean age of 22.36 ($SD = 3.26$). The participants answered the measurement tools of negative emotions, negative stereotypes, quality of contact, ethnic identity, political identity, realistic threat, and symbolic threat.

Procedure

The study, the general protocol of which was approved by the Middle East Technical University Human Subjects Ethics Committee on 4 August 2020 with the protocol number '229-ODTU-2020', was conducted online using *QUALTRICS* software. The data was collected within a period of three months.

Findings

Descriptive Findings

When the correlations between the indicators of latent variables were examined (see Table 1), it was apparent that the variables of negative emotions and negative stereotypes that define the negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees had a positive correlation, whereas they had negative correlations with the variable of quality of contact. Moreover, the variables of identification with Turkish identity and right-wing political orientation which define ethnic and political identification; and the variables of realistic threat and symbolic threat which define the perceived threat due to Syrian refugees had a positive correlation.

While negative emotions and negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees had positive correlations with perceived realistic threat, perceived symbolic threat, and sex (1: female, 2: male), the quality of contact with Syrian refugees had negative correlations with the aforementioned variables. Additionally, a negative correlation between negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees and right-wing political orientation was found.

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

Before the mediational model testing, which is recommended on the level of latent variables, the potential predictors of the variables of negative emotions, negative stereotypes and quality of contact which define negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees were tested with three-step hierarchical regression analyses (see Table 2). The demographic variables of age and sex in the first step, the indicator variables of identification with Turkish identity and right-wing political orientation which define ethnic and political identification in the second step, and the indicator variables of realistic threat and symbolic threat which define the perceived threat due to Syrian refugees in the third step were added to the analyses.

While sex (1: female, 2: male), realistic threat and symbolic threat were positively associated with negative emotions and negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees, right-wing political orientation was negatively associated. Additionally, identification with Turkish identity was positively associated with negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees. To be more precise, males were identified with having higher levels of negative emotions and negative stereotypes against refugees when compared to females. Moreover, those who had a stronger perception of realistic and symbolic threats due to Syrian refugees had higher scores of negative emotions and negative stereotypes against refugees. In addition, it was detected that there were lower levels of negative emotions and negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees among those who have a right-wing political identifica-

tion, however, identifying oneself with Turkish identity increased the negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees.

In another hierarchical regression analysis, sex (1: female, 2: male), realistic threats and symbolic threats were negatively associated with the quality of contact with Syrian refugees, whereas right-wing political orientation was positively associated. Compared to females, males had lower quality of contact with refugees. Moreover, those who had higher perception of realistic and symbolic threats due to Syrian refugees had lower scores on quality of contact with refugees. Finally, it was detected that the quality of contact with Syrian refugees increased with right-wing political identification.

Structural Equation Model Testing

A structural equation model testing was applied in order to test the mediational model recommended on the latent variable level (see Figure 1). Through the perceived threat due to Syrian refugees, ethnic and political identification had a positive indirect association with negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees. Consistent with the research hypothesis, the rise of ethnic and political identification has increased the degree of perceived threat due to Syrian refugees living in Turkey, and this situation has strengthened the negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees. In other words, those who identify themselves with Turkish identity and right-wing political orientation have had higher perceptions of realistic and symbolic threats due to Syrian refugees living in Turkey, which increasing the negative emotions and negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees and reducing the quality of contact with the refugees.

In addition, ethnic and political identification had a negative direct association with negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees. As the ethnic and political identification increased, the negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees tended to decline. In other words, those who identify themselves with Turkish identity and right-wing political orientation have had less negative emotions and negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees while having a higher quality of contact with refugees.

Discussion

Consistent with the research hypothesis, those who identify themselves with Turkish identity and right-wing political orientation have had a higher perception of realistic and symbolic threats due to Syrian refugees living in Turkey, which strengthened the negative emotions and negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees and decreased the quality of contact with them. Studies in the literature have often focused on the direct relationship of

ethnic and political identification with negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees, coming up with conflicting findings. One way to clarify the conflicting findings is to pay attention to the roles of mediator variables in tested relationships.

Within the context of attitudes towards ethnic groups, it is supported by various studies that the perception of threat increases the negative emotions and negative stereotypes against out-groups and damages the quality of contact with them (Riek et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2005; Yanbolloğlu, 2018). In the study conducted by Çoksan et al. (2020), it was detected that the perception of symbolic threats due to Syrian refugees increases as the level of identification of the Turkish and Kurdish participants with their ethnic identities increases. In another study, it was concluded that those who have a higher identification with their Israeli ethnic identity possess a stronger perception of realistic threat due to Russian refugees (Bizman & Yinon, 2001). In another study that focuses on the attitudes between white and black populations, realistic and symbolic threats mediated the relationship between identifying oneself with in-group and having racist attitudes towards the out-group in both sample groups (Stephan et al., 2002). In other words, the findings of the current study are in line with the findings of the literature.

It is suggested by various studies that right-wing political orientation involves values based on security and conformity as well as the motivation to maintain the status quo (Feldman, 2003; Hawley, 2011; Jost et al., 2003a; 2003b; 2009). Accepting those who deviate from the majority (predominant) culture contradicts with the values of right-wing political orientation (Homola & Tavits, 2018) and people who identified with right-wing political orientation have a stronger perception of symbolic threats against minority groups and cultures (Davis & Deole, 2015; Rustenbach, 2010; Vallejo-Martín et al., 2021). Additionally, due to security-based values of right-wing political orientation (Jost et al., 2003a; 2003b), it is indicated that people who identify themselves with right-wing political orientation have higher levels of perceived realistic threat regarding conditions such as unemployment and increasing crime rates which may risk national security and well-being and the pursuit of stability (Davis & Deole, 2015; Hawley, 2011; Vallejo-Martín et al., 2021).

In addition to the indirect relationship, the direct relationship of ethnic and political identification with negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees was also tested. However, contrary to the research hypothesis, those who identify themselves with Turkish identity and right-wing political orientation have had lower negative emotions and negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees

living in Turkey and better quality of contact with the refugees. This finding contradicts the research hypothesis as well as the studies in the literature which claim that those who identify themselves with Turkish identity have negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees (Fırat, 2019; Gülüm, 2019; Özdemir, 2017; Yanılmaz, 2019). At this point, it is necessary to focus on other variables which can make this relationship in question more meaningful. The similarities based on identities between the local people in Turkey and Syrian refugees affect intergroup relationships. For instance, the studies conducted in Turkey reveal that the shared religious identity between the local people and Syrian refugees supports positive attitudes towards the refugees (Bolgün & Uçan, 2020; Eser & Uygur, 2019; Şahin & Eşici, 2020; Tamer, 2016). In other words, religious identity, which is a major part of the Turkish identity (Özdemir, 2013), increases the perceived similarity with Syrian refugees, reducing the out-group perception.

When the direct relationship is reviewed within the context of political orientation, the policies regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey pursued by the right-wing Justice and Development Party, the party in power since 2002, and how much people with right-wing political orientation support these policies should be taken into consideration. According to the studies in the literature, those who are politically right-wing oriented tend to maintain their culture and values more than those who are politically left-wing oriented (Altemeyer, 1996; Jost et al., 2008), and these individuals develop negative attitudes towards out-groups (Anderson & Ferguson, 2018; Perry et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2019). However, the studies in Turkey contradict with these findings. In a study conducted by Özkeçeci (2017), it was determined that those who are politically right-wing oriented have positive attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. In a similar sense, Yanbolloğlu (2018) states that as people identify themselves more right-wing oriented politically, their anxiety about Syrian refugees decrease. In that sense, the open-door policy for Syrian refugees that is practiced by the Justice and Development Party and their actions which support the acceptance of refugees into the country seem to have an influence on the attitudes of the people with right-wing political orientation towards Syrian refugees. The shared identity based on Sunni Islam religion, which is often emphasized by the leaders of the Justice and Development Party, leads the politically right-wing oriented people to perceive Syrian refugees as an in-group, thus reducing their negative attitudes towards them.

According to findings of the research, males had stronger negative emotions and negative stereotypes against Syrian refugees and had a lower quality of con-

tact with them compared to females. This gender-based difference is also supported by other works in the literature (Aktaş et al., 2021; Hernes & Knudsen, 1992; Makashvili et al., 2018; Short, 2004). In the studies conducted in Turkey, males have stronger negative opinions (Aktaş et al., 2021; Padır, 2019) and negative emotions (Karaoğlu, 2015) regarding the refugees compared to females. This difference is interpreted with traditional gender roles. In the traditional family structure that is predominant in Turkey, males represent a figure of authority and have duties such as keeping family members together or earning their bread (Sunar, 2002). The rise in rental property and food prices as well as unemployment and crime rates in Turkey after the arrival of Syrian refugees cause the local people to experience problems with fulfilling their basic needs (Efe, 2015; Karataş, 2015) and increase the negative attitudes towards refugees among men. Additionally, the fact that negative attitudes toward out-groups are weaker among females is interpreted by females' ability to show empathy (Hoffman, 1977; Tous-saint & Webb, 2005). The studies focusing on the notion of empathy with Syrian refugees revealed that females have a higher level of empathy with refugees compared to males (Pawlicka et al., 2019) and that those who can empathize better with refugees show more positive attitudes towards them (Aktaş et al., 2021; Çakır & Uysal, 2020).

In sum, the current study focuses on the factors which may be related to negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees living in Turkey and determines the mediating role of realistic and symbolic threats that are perceived due to Syrian refugees in the relationship between ethnic and political identification and negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees. The negative attitudes of local people make it more difficult for the refugees to adapt to the society in which they seek shelter and increases the possibility of intergroup conflict. In this respect, it is essential to make sense of the processes behind the negative attitudes between these groups. The findings of the study are expected to be of use to researchers who work on the subject of immigration, as well as professionals who develop and implement social policies related to this topic.