

Perception Towards Others of Europe in Times of Crisis; A Visit to Social Identity Theory

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Abstract: This paper investigates how the perception towards refugees was constructed within the European political scene during the wave of the European refugee crisis. To this end, it conducts a detailed sociopsychological analysis from the perspective of Social Identity Theory (SIT) which was proposed by Tajfel in 1974. Adopting SIT is valuable to utilize its main inspiration regarding how individuals' sense of belonging to a particular society is shaped by identifying themselves as 'us'. Inquiry of individuals' identification of their belonging to a particular group is of critical importance to observe the rise of Islamophobia in Europe, which triggers fear and hostility towards Muslims in general and refugees in particular. Another prevailing reason for adopting SIT is to unveil the act of 'othering' against refugees by the right-wing parties thereby forming an 'ingroup' of European identities. Therefore, this paper also aims to enlighten the extent to which the articulation of Islamophobia might trigger the escalation of the fear and hostility against refugees within the European public.

Keywords: Social Identity Theory (SIT), European Identity, Refugee Crisis, Islamophobia

Introduction

The dramatic rise of the Islamophobia in the European national political context has necessitated conducting comprehensible research regarding the issue in recent years. The issue has become even more salient with the emergence of the European refugee crisis. While the mainstream literature put its emphasis on the right-wing politicians' acts of mobilization and politicization, this research aims to contribute a multi-dimensional perspective to the literature by adopting the Social Identity Theory (SIT) as proposed by Henri Tajfel in 1974. This research

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deals with the issue rather by taking the Refugee Crisis an issue of identity. It is of critical importance to analyze the political and sociological developments by looking at them as issues of identity within the modern societies which are highly open to contestations of the identities with a possible perspective of generating a 'clash of civilisations'.

To this end, this article aims to reveal the act of 'othering' against the Muslim refugees which invokes as 'us' and 'them'. Since the inquiry into individuals' identification of their belonging to a particular group which forms an 'ingroup' is the prerequisite of the act of othering towards the members of the outgroup, SIT would be valuable to establish the relevance. Such an analysis focused on the socio-psychological aspect will be beneficial to understand the reason behind the increase of the support to populist right-wing. Understanding the way your enemies think is the first step to challenge them effectively.

In fact, this article argues that the act of othering by the populist right-wing European politicians is two-phased. Accordingly, while the first phase consists of othering against 'refugees' by forming an ingroup of European identity along which individuals can identify his/herself with other members of a certain group, the second phase covers othering within this ingroup of European identity in order to form smaller 'ingroups' along with the lines of 'national identities'. Such two-phased act of othering fits the Risse's (2005: p. 295) description of 'Russian Matroska dolls' within which nested identities exist. Then, the act of othering within the groups of this concentric circle is also a similar type of multi-layered and nested. In practice, while the first phase generates anti-Muslim waves, the second phase triggers anti-globalism, nativism, and Euroscepticism. Thus, the concentric circle of othering is conceived. That is why this research shifts its attention to the articulation of Islamophobia in the light of the refugee crisis during which right-wing parties have found a suitable ground for the articulation of their anti-Muslim discourses towards forming an ingroup of European identity.

To this end, this paper will firstly analyze the main aspirations of the SIT in order to understand individuals' sense of belonging to a particular society which shapes their perception towards outgroups. Moreover, SIT will be utilized to reveal group boundaries, intergroup relations, discrimination, and prejudice. This is of critical importance because the members of the ingroup when they face with a threat from the outgroup, are more inclined to get along within the lines of the commonalities of the ingroup (Vivian and Natalie, 2007: p. 93).

In this case, the threat is directly targeted their sense of distinctiveness and sense of belonging (Vivian and Natalie: 2007, p. 94). As a result, the members of the ingroup, being under such threat, are more inclined to differentiate themselves

from that particular so-called out-group which paves the way for the in-group favoritism and intergroup discrimination (Vivian and Natalie, 2007: p. 94). Such inclination has become especially salient within the context of the refugee crisis in Europe. That is why, after discussing the main inspirations of the SIT, this paper will focus on how the refugee flow forming an outgroup is constructed as an external threat against the ingroup of European identity. In this way, it will show that ‘the others of Europe’ through the practices of ‘othering’ is conceived.

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

This article utilizes the main aspirations of the SIT in order to effectively shed a light to intergroup discrimination and prejudice rooted in the intergroup relations. In fact, there are numerous definitions and interpretations of the term ‘social identity’ within the literature since different academic disciplines have proposed different approaches to the ‘self’ and ‘identity’. Accordingly, the application of the social identity theory differs widely. In its original form, social identity refers the way how the self-concept of individuals is defined through their group memberships (Çoyamak, 2009: p. 4). The affiliation to groups is regarded as the individuals’ source of positive self-evaluation (Çoyamak, 2009: p. 4). That is why individuals affiliated with certain ingroups are inclined to differentiate themselves from the members of the outgroups. In this way, the ingroup/outgroup differentiation is basically formed. This differentiation is highly hinged on the construction of the ingroups and outgroups at the first place.

We cannot realize ourselves except in so far as we can recognize the other in his relationship to us. It is as he takes the attitude of the other that the individual is able to realize himself as a self. (Mead, 1934: p. 194; Taylor and Spencer, 2004, p. 8).

Social construction leading to ‘intergroup differentiation’ has been constantly generated when Europe had to face with the massive flow of people from the Eastern Mediterranean. That is why this research focus on SIT’s main aspirations regarding the process of ‘intergroup differentiation’. To this end, SIT proposes three mental processes as the main sources of the intergroup differentiation (Tajfel and Turner, 2004: pp. 276–293). The first process is called social categorization which categorizes individuals through their similar characteristics (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995: p. 260). SIT argues that such categorization is conducted by adopting ‘minimal group paradigm’ which refers to the existence of the minimal conditions making possible to differentiate groups in order to construct an ingroup and outgroup.

As Hogg and Terry (2000: p. 4) argue that social categorization gives leeway for sharpening intergroup boundaries as it produces stereotypical perceptions and actions assigned to people.

The second process is 'social identification' which refers to the perception of the individual's sense of belonging to a society. It is perceived through a 'process of identification' with other members of the ingroup. As Brewer (2001: p. 115) argues that SIT is useful to unveil the link between individual and group level analyses in social identity phenomena. This is because, the SIT depersonalizes the self by defending the existence of the 'ingroup prototype' because of collective behavior, shared norms and values. In this respect, the social identification shapes individuals' perception towards the members of the outgroup as well. In other words, as people are inclined to evaluate others based on their group memberships, it would end up with the formation of stereotyping for others (outgroup) which boosts the intergroup boundaries that the first process of social categorization triggers.

The last phase is social comparison which reveals basically the process of comparison of the self with the members of the outgroups. Accordingly, once the individual's identification as a part of an ingroup is formed, his/her inclination to compare himself/herself with the members of the outgroup emerges. It is important to elaborate the main reasons of the social comparison further in order to build a basis for analysing the European refugee crisis as a crisis of identity. The inclination to 'compare' is explained by the individuals' need to promote the positive ingroup images of the ingroup. On the one hand, in this way, being the member of an ingroup appears as the source of enhancing individuals' self-esteem. On the other hand, it increases ingroup bias by limiting the intergroup similarities and thus exaggerating the intergroup differences (Ongur, 2010: p. 135). Thus, it generates intergroup discrimination. The ingroup bias becomes especially prevalent when intergroup competition and threat by the outgroup emerges. The threat is regarded as directed against their sense of distinctiveness and sense of belonging to the ingroup. In return, this sense of being threatened aggravates the phenomenon of social comparison even more (Vignoles and Moncaster, 2007: p. 94). That is why the threat is regarded as a useful tool in predicting the intergroup discrimination (Vignoles and Moncaster, 2007, p. 93).

In sum, there are two main reasons for social comparison. Firstly, social comparison provides a suitable ground for the verification of the existence of the ingroup (Huddy, 2001: 135). Such a salient verification of the group's existence which led to sharp intergroup boundaries was witnessed during the European refugee crisis. Secondly, the characteristics of the outgroup are undermined through social comparison, for the sake of increasing the positive characteristics of the

ingroup as a manifestation of the positive group image which would enhance the self-esteem of the members of the ingroup. In fact, social comparison of ingroup/outgroup is the root of the intergroup discrimination. This is because highlighting the differentiating attribute dimensions triggers the ingroup bias of the ingroup. Being highlighted by its differentiating attribute dimensions, the ingroup formation begins to display so-called 'ingroup bias' which forms a positive ingroup image (Huddy, 2001: 136). The following sections of this article will try to understand ingroup bias which plays a key role in the formation of the intergroup relations within the context of the European refugee crisis.

Perception towards Refugees during the European Refugee Crisis

After clarifying the main aspirations of the theoretical background of SIT, the intergroup relations which have been constructed between the European identity and others during the refugee crisis will be analyzed now in this section. Accordingly, the European identity as an 'ingroup' has become notable because of the existence of the 'outgroup' i.e. the refugees. In accordance with the aspirations of the SIT, that is because group identity prevails when the group becomes salient (Huddy, 2001: p. 131). In the same sense, European identity becomes a prominent group of constituting the common characteristics or fate because of the refugees who are present in the environment. That has provided a suitable ground for the emergence of the above-mentioned three mental processes leading to the intergroup differentiation within the European society against the refugees.

In this respect, within the social categorization process, the European people forming the 'ingroup' of European identity are categorized according to the similar characteristics the European society as a whole. The so-called minimum group paradigm includes common labels such as European values and norms promoting the assurance of human rights, rule of law, good governance and liberal democracy. These values are regarded as the positive images of the European ingroup. In this way, by promoting these values they establish the superiority over the outgroup of refugees. The elicited positive distinctiveness increases both the ingroup favoritism and the outgroup discrimination. As a result, the ingroup/outgroup discrimination fuelling the constructions of the cultural, religious, 'others' as the 'enemies' of the European people has been formulated through the existence of these norms, which leads us to the social identification.

As the process of social identification depersonalizes the self by generating a prototype of the self, it leads to the stereotyping the 'other' (Ongur, 2010: p.137). The stereotyping as a critical step of the 'othering' against the refugees, has been adopted by the populist right-wing parties in order to construct refugees as a 'threat' in the eyes of the European public during the refugee crisis. In a way, persistent stereotyping helped to garner support for Islamophobia around Europe. Accordingly, right-wing parties employed Islamophobic, xenophobic discourses to differentiate the ingroup of 'European identity' from the 'Muslim outgroup' thereby forming ingroup/outgroup differentiation. To this end, the European public was mobilized against the refugees by the right-wing populist parties. They tried to construct a shortcut belief about the 'outgroup of refugees' in the mindsets of the European people. The discourses by the famous political figures focused that Islam is incompatible with the values of the West have been widely articulated (Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris, 2018: p. 1881). By arguing the incompatibility of Islam with the European values, they mostly included religious discrimination. They depicted the flow of people escaping from the humanitarian disaster as the Muslim invaders of the Christian culture and values (Hafez, 2015: p. 24).

The situation has even more aggravated because of the terrorist attacks around Europe. Refugees suddenly turned into potential scapegoats for the radical activities of the terrorists. It became also the main source of securitization acts of the right-wing politicians. They labeled refugees as a threat to their life. Through the securitization act present in their rhetoric, they tried to arouse fear-based ethnic nationalism in order to gain support for their xenophobic ideologies (Postelnicescu, 2016: p.203). Therefore, the 'discursively constructed' fear of refugees had both bolstered the far-right parties and escalated the hate speech and hate crime against the refugees. For instance, Prime Minister of Hungary Victor Orban described the refugee crisis as a "Trojan Horse of Terror" ('Hungary's Leader Calls Migration 'Trojan Horse' of Terrorism' 2017) by ignoring the fact that the refugees are themselves victims of the terrorist attacks of the radical terrorist groups. In the same way, Marine Le Pen tried to invoke the suspicion that Muslims might be behind any act of terrorism by asserting that "Behind mass immigration, there is terrorism." (Chumley, 2017).

The articulated fear and hostility towards refugees within the European public have been accompanied by the dehumanization towards refugees as well (Bruneau, Kteily, and Laustsen, 2018: p. 645). That exacerbated the negative outgroup attitudes and behaviors throughout Europe. In fact, dehumanization is strongly linked with the hostile attitudes observed during the refugee crisis such as barring entry to refugees through razor wire fence or confining refugees

in remote places. It has been also witnessed in the statements of several European politicians. For example, by adopting the dehumanizing language, David Cameron explicitly describe refugees as “You have got a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life” (Elgot, 2016). In the same direction, Jarosław Kaczyński, former prime minister of Poland argued that “Migrants have brought diseases like cholera and dysentery to Europe, as well as “all sorts of parasites and protozoa, which ... while not dangerous in the organisms of these people, could be dangerous here.” (Cienski 2016). Such depictions which underestimate the importance of empathy for the refugees facing desperate conditions are very dangerous in forming a perception of the European public towards refugees. This is because as Bruneau et al (2018: 646) argue that the emphatical failures are traced in the intergroup conflict.

Conclusion

This article aimed to shed a light on the formation of the ingroup/outgroup differentiation which has led to the acts of othering against refugees within the European political setting. To this end, it investigated how perception towards refugees are constructed by the right-wing parties during the European Refugee crisis. For conducting such an analysis, it utilized three mental processes as the main sources of the intergroup differentiation as proposed by the SIT. Accordingly, in the first process, people assign themselves to a certain ingroup because of existent similar characteristics, which is called as the social categorization phase. In the case of European identity, these elements are mostly based on European values and norms. This article revealed that the ingroup of European identity became highly prominent during the European refugee crisis because of the existence of the ‘outgroup’ i.e. refugees. In the second process, people began to evaluate others based on their group memberships. European individuals’ perception as members of the ‘European ingroup’ towards the refugees as the members of the ‘outgroup’ have been highly shaped by the stereotypical mindset and actions. In this respect, it is observed that the acts and employed Islamophobic, xenophobic discourses by the right-wing have played a critical role. It has been significant in respect to the social comparison process which reveals basically the process of comparison of the self with the members of the outgroups. This is because, refugees are portrayed as the main threat to the sense of distinctiveness and sense of belonging of the people assigned to the ingroup of European identity which has sharpened the intergroup boundaries. Moreover, while the populist politicians were

trying to mobilize the European public, they usually included mainly securitizing, dehumanizing perspectives to their discourses. It increased the formed intergroup differences even more. In this way, group boundaries between European identity and refugees have been strengthened.

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