

A Psychological Perspective on the Current “Migration Crisis”



Psychology can contribute to understanding the current “migration crisis” in three important ways. It can provide insights into: 1) how successive generations of forced migrants adjust to receiving cultures (and vice versa); 2) the anger and hostility that is directed to forced migrants; and 3) how individuals, social services, and government can build capacity to bring about positive outcomes for migrants and receiving societies.

The Adjustment of Forced Migrants to Receiving Cultures (and vice versa)

Acculturation describes the process of change that arises through the movement of individuals. In the context of migration, this concept can help us to understand the early stages of ‘culture shock’ as well as changes that happen within communities across several generations. Psychological research suggests that there are four different acculturation strategies: *assimilation* (when a migrant adopts the receiving culture and rejects their original culture), *separation* (when a migrant rejects the receiving culture and maintains their original culture), *integration* (where a migrant both adopts the receiving culture and maintains their original culture), and *marginalisation* (where a migrant rejects the receiving culture and rejects their original culture). ‘Integration’ and ‘assimilation’ are often used interchangeably, but there is a core difference: with integration, the original culture is retained, whereas with assimilation it is not. What is important in this research is that there is not a zero-sum relationship between receiving and original culture. Indeed, the healthiest form of acculturation (i.e., integration) involves maintaining both cultures.

Integration involves the adoption of elements of *both* receiving culture and original culture. Integration is the optimum way for forced migrants to adapt to their receiving culture (as measured by health, wellbeing, and contact with receiving nationals).

Integrated forced migrants will retain some elements of their original culture (e.g., dress) while also fully adopting elements of the receiving culture (e.g., working practices). There can often be gaps between how receiving cultures would like forced migrants to adapt (i.e., expectations of assimilation) compared to how forced migrants would like to adapt (i.e., expectations of integration). Integration may be mistaken for separation (e.g., it may be incorrectly assumed that a parent speaking Farsi to their child is unable to speak English).

Acculturation occurs at a surface level (e.g., in cuisine) but also at a deeper level (e.g., in values and emotions). We should expect it to take up to three generations for deeper acculturation to occur. Acculturation strategies can vary within communities, within families, and across generations. This may lead to conflict, particularly within different generations of the same family.

Anger and Hostility towards Forced Migrants

‘Migrants’ are considered a troubling category of people for receiving societies, because they disrupt the assumed order of things. However, the category ‘migrant’ is neither neutral nor fixed. Research has shown that media outlets describe the same group of people as ‘refugees’, ‘migrants’ or ‘asylum seekers’. They thereby elicit more or less sympathy for forced migrants. Addressing migrants as a fixed group (whether they are described as migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers) tends to encourage a negative distinction between ‘us’ (majority population) and ‘them’ (minority population). This fosters the perception that migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers are all the same and that ‘their’ interests, values, and traditions are competing with ‘ours’. In this sense, the categories and representations used when examining and debating migrants and the “migration crisis” are critical and must be carefully considered. Indeed, when there have been cases

of communities rallying to protect people from being deported, this is often when ‘migrants’ have been transformed into ‘children’, ‘families’, and ‘co-workers’. In practice, then, framing this issue as a “migration crisis” might be part of the problem.

Much of the anger and hostility that is directed towards forced migrants is related to feelings of threat (and specifically economic threat). The hostility that many people feel towards forced migrants can be shown to be related to their own feelings of economic vulnerability. As such, the current anti-immigration climate is closely related to austerity and the economic downturn.

Reducing economic uncertainty and inequality in the UK would go some way to reducing anti-immigration sentiment.

Building Capacity to Bring about Positive Change

Psychological research shows that integration is the most positive form of acculturation. Successful integration requires (a) opportunities to meet members of the receiving culture and build positive relationships with them; and (b) support networks to maintain cultural ties. The current ‘hostile environment’ policy in the UK works against successful integration by dispersing migrants (i) into temporary accommodation; (ii) away from potential support networks; and (iii) into potentially hostile communities. This policy also places barriers on access to education (specifically to English language services, which have been significantly cut). Based on psychological research, integration could be more effectively promoted by:

Providing long-term English language classes for forced migrants through Further Education. The current provision is difficult to access and insufficient to support integration.

Providing structures to enable migrants to build medium- to long-term, positive relationships with UK nationals. These would aid integration and reduce negative health outcomes. Structures might include mentoring/family buddy schemes, but also basic citizen rights around housing, work, and education.

Providing structures to enable dispersed communities to maintain ties with their heritage culture.

Providing adequate financial support for local authorities to support dispersal programmes; discouraging dispersal to areas that are already experiencing high economic deprivation; and demonstrating to local communities the ways in which forced migrants bring additional resources to the community (rather than competing with residents over already limited resources).

SPSSI-UK’s goal is to promote the use of rigorous, empirical and critical psychological research to inform policy, debate and practice for important social issues.

Because the migration debate is often framed using psychological terms (integration, assimilation, multiculturalism, racial profiling, xenophobia, racism, islamophobia, etc.), social psychologists have the responsibility and authority to engage with this debate. This informational document was prepared by Dr Katy Greenland (Cardiff University, SPSSI-UK Steering Committee) on behalf of a two-day conference that brought together distinguished social psychologists and policy specialists to focus on issues concerning the “The Current Migration Crisis in Europe” (Cardiff, August 2016). For further information please visit/email:

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