

Young refugees' adaptation process in Germany: The role of social identification and mutual understanding in inter-ethnic friendships with native peers

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Abstract

Drawing on the intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008) as well as on acculturation frameworks (Bierwaczonek & Kunst, 2021), we investigate connections between social identification with Germany, mutual understanding, and socio-cultural adaptation in friendships between young refugees and native peers. In a preliminary analysis of cross-sectional data, we report descriptive and correlational findings from a sample of young refugees ($n = 41$). As hypothesized, we found a positive interrelation between the number of inter-ethnic friendships and socio-cultural adaptation ($p = .028$). Exploratory findings did not support our other hypothesis regarding a positive interconnection between mutual understanding and socio-cultural adaptation. We discuss our results considering theoretical and practical implications and outline subsequent studies.

Keywords: refugees, acculturation, socio-cultural adaptation, inter-ethnic friendships, intergroup contact theory

1. Introduction

Since 2015, around 2.3 million asylum seekers have applied for asylum in Germany, one third of whom were minors at the time of application (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2016). What factors promote socio-cultural adaptation for young refugees? Drawing on the contact hypothesis by Allport (1954), refugees' attitudes toward the mainstream society and feelings of integration are closely connected to experiences of inter-ethnic contact with natives. For instance, recent findings suggests that social support on the personal and societal level play a central role in young refugees' adaptation process (e.g., Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2020). However, research on peer relations in young refugees' adaptation is still scarce, yet pivotal for the work of social workers, teachers, and educators. Thus, **the present study examines links between young refugees' friendships with German peers and their socio-cultural adaptation in Germany.**

For our study, we relate to frameworks of acculturation (Bierwiazzonek & Kunst, 2021) and intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Researchers commonly understand acculturation as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of both groups.” (Redfield et al., 1936, p. 150). Young refugees have to connect both cultural spheres, and their way of integrating (or: dis-integrating) those cultural patterns influences their socio-cultural adaptation (Bierwiazzonek & Kunst, 2021). Pre-conditions of positive inter-cultural contacts have been described in Gordon Allport’s *contact hypothesis* (Allport, 1954). Pettigrew and Tropp both validated and extended the contact hypothesis by formulating the *intergroup contact theory* (ICT; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008). According to the ICT, intergroup friendship appears the most promising way to reduce intergroup prejudice, as it “potentially invokes all four¹ mediating processes” (Pettigrew, 1998, pp. 75–76).

1.1 Socio-cultural adaptation and inter-ethnic friendships

Inter- and intra-ethnic friendships seem to serve different needs for young immigrants: friendships with ingroup members can be connected to the exploration of ethnic identity, whereas friendships with natives are important for socio-cultural adaptation (Jugert & Titzmann, 2020). Furthermore, inter-ethnic friendships have psychosocial benefits for immigrant adolescents (Graham et al., 2014). Yet these relations can be more demanding, and carry a higher risk of misunderstanding than same-ethnic friendships (Jugert, 2021). But what factors strengthen the prevalence and stability of inter-ethnic friendships? The present study exemplarily addresses social identification with the mainstream culture, mutual understanding in inter-ethnic friendships, and their influence on young refugees’ socio-cultural adaptation.

According to Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) *social identity theory*, individuals satisfy their need for positive self-esteem by their belonging to social groups. Current research shows how positive and negative experiences of social contact shape refugees’ social identification in Germany: when refugees experience discrimination, this can be reflected in more negative attitudes towards the mainstream society (Maitah et al., 2018). Generally, both national and dual identification positively influence ethnic minority adolescents’ inter-ethnic friendships (Jugert et al., 2018). Thus, **it is expected that closer contact to mainstream society (e.g., by having more German friends) can be connected to a more positive identification with German mainstream culture, and consequently higher socio-cultural adaptation (H1).**

In an intergroup context, other-focused emotions, such as empathy or compassion, have been linked to behavioral tendencies (Harth et al., 2008). Mutual understanding is a crucial aspect of positive experiences within inter-ethnic encounters (Shelton & Richeison, 2006) and promotes inter-ethnic friendships (Jugert & Titzmann, 2020). Also, the ability to empathize is an essential factor for the longevity of inter-ethnic friendships (Jugert et al., 2013). Understanding the other as well as feeling understood can strengthen friendship bonds, which might explain young refugees’ adaptation. We

¹ Which are, according to Pettigrew and Tropp (2006): learning about the out-group, change of behavior, affective ties, and the ingroup’s reappraisal

therefore expect that, **if refugees report higher understanding in their inter-ethnic friendships, this should also be reflected in higher socio-cultural adaptation (H2).**

1.2 The present study

To promote social support and positive peer relations between refugees and native peers, it is important to examine these relations for a) theory development and b) the purpose of informing institutions involved in the joint education or schooling² of young refugees and their native peers. Thus, the present research explores associations between inter-ethnic friendships and socio-cultural adaptation for a sample of young refugees in Germany. Drawing on data of a preliminary subsample from a cross-sectional online survey, we report descriptive and correlational findings prior to the analysis of the above-mentioned hypotheses.

2. Method

2.1 Procedure and participants

As it was expected that the planned sample of young refugees (also, with sufficient language proficiency for German) would be difficult to reach, participants were recruited via snowball-sampling. For instance, we sent the call for participation to several local Telegram-groups³, migrant organizations, and integration projects in different German states. This resulted in a preliminary sample of 41 persons. In our call, we invited young adult refugees for participation who had come to Germany during their childhood or adolescence. Participants filled out an online survey in German language (anticipated duration: 10-20 min). They could voluntarily sign in for the drawing of a 25 Euro voucher among 50 participants each.

Of the 41 participants, the majority indicated Syria as their country of birth (48.8%), 6 participants came from the Ukraine (14.6%), and 2 from Afghanistan (4.9%). Ten other countries were named by one person each (2.4% each).⁴ As their first language, 24 named Arabic (58.5%), four persons each named Ukrainian or Russian (9.8%), and three Persian (7.3%).⁵ Most of the respondents indicated living in Germany since more than five years (65.9%), seven persons since two to five years (17.5%), and six since a year (15.0%). The gender distribution was rather balanced, with 19 persons each of male/female gender (46.3%), two non-binary persons (4.9%), and one trans person (2.4%). Respondents had a wide age range (17-47 years) with a mean of 30.2 years ($SD = 7.7$).

² Although this study does not directly address adolescent refugees, it is assumed that young adult refugees' perspectives on their friendships with natives should as well be transferable to younger peers. In following studies, we will address inter-ethnic friendships in a school context, see also section **4. Discussion**.

³ In these local groups within the Telegram messenger, members share (im)material goods on a non-monetary basis – such as pleas to participate in scientific surveys.

⁴ Which were: Iraq, Palestine, Sudan, Israel, Yemen, Yugoslavia, Russia, Saudi-Arabia, Germany, and Vietnam.

⁵ Other languages as indicated by one person each (2.6%): German, Kurdish, Romanes/Serbo-Croatian, Vietnamese, and Wolof.

2.2 Measures

We created an online questionnaire via the SoSci Survey platform, with measures of young refugees' everyday experiences, adaptation, and socio-demographic background. Socio-cultural adaptation was assessed as the dependent variable. The number of German friends, mutual understanding, and national identification will be included as predictors. Results will be controlled for gender, age, duration of stay in Germany, and subjective socio-economic status (SES) as demographic background variables. For the subjective SES, participants were asked how they would perceive their financial situation in Germany (1=very bad, 5=very well).

Socio-cultural adaptation was measured using 4 items, adapted from a scale by Wilson et al. (2017). On a 5-point-scale (1=not easy at all, 5=very easy), participants rated how easy they would find different situations in Germany, e.g., "building and maintaining relationships".

Similar to an item by Beelmann et al. (2019), the *number of inter-ethnic friendships* was assessed by asking the respondents how many close friends of German origin they have (1=none, 2=one, 3=two, 4=three, 5=four or more). Prior to the item, "close friends" was defined as persons whom they would see often and do something together, regardless of the other person's gender.

National identification was assessed with four items developed by Leszczensky and Gräbs Santiago (2014) for the German context, for example "It bothers me when someone speaks badly about Germany" (1=totally disagree, 5=totally agree).

The two items for *mutual understanding* in inter-ethnic relations were developed by the authors, but inspired by items from a study on inter-ethnic understanding by Holoien et al. (2015). On a 5-point scale (1=not at all, 5=completely), participants rated how well a) they understand their German friends and b) how well they feel understood by them. The item was supplemented by an explanation that understanding is meant to be the ability of "knowing what the other persons/you think/s or feel/s".

2.3 Analytical strategy

In the latest version of our data set prior to submission (March 31, 2023), 41 participants had filled out the questionnaire. Hence, the application of inference statistics is somewhat limited. In the following, descriptive analyses, and correlation analyses (Spearman's rho – which is applicable to small samples) are reported. For the final presentation of our data, an increased sample size will enable linear regression and mediation analyses (for sample calculation, see section 3.2). For the present analysis, we used SPSS version 29.0.0.0.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptives and correlational analyses

In Table 1, means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations (Spearman's rho) are reported for all included measures. The preliminary analysis of the relevant outcomes enables an approximation of the underlying associations. As expected for H1, the number of inter-ethnic friends correlated positively with socio-cultural adaptation ($\rho = .028$). However, national identification correlated neither with the number of inter-ethnic friends ($\rho = .217$) nor with socio-cultural adaptation ($\rho = .334$). Instead, national identification was positively associated with felt understanding ($\rho = .005$). As for our second hypothesis, felt and perceived understanding were positively interrelated ($\rho < .001$), but neither of the factors showed a significant connection with socio-cultural adaptation (felt: $\rho = .105$, perceived: $\rho = .180$). Interestingly, both variables correlated negatively with age (felt: $\rho = .014$, perceived: $\rho = .015$) and were connected to a higher number of inter-ethnic friendships (felt: $\rho = .018$, perceived: $\rho = .001$).

Of the other demographic variables, we also found some significant correlations. Male gender was associated with higher national identification ($\rho = .017$) and lower subjective SES ($\rho = .044$). Higher subjective SES was in turn correlated with higher national identification ($\rho = .011$). Those refugees who reported to have lived in Germany for a while indicated having a higher number of inter-ethnic friendships ($\rho = .015$).

Table 1

Descriptives and intercorrelations for all included measures

Variable	Descriptives			Correlations ($n = 37$)								
	n	M	SD	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1. Socio-cultural adaptation	41	3.2	0.9	.36*	.16	.27	.23	-.08	.03	.08	.01	
2. Number of inter-ethnic friends	41	3.3	1.6		.21	.39*	.52**	.04	-.08	.40*	-.04	
3. National identification	41	3.4	0.8			.45**	.27	-.39*	-.22	.06	.41*	
4. Felt understanding	38	3.5	1.0				.73**	.01	-.40*	.11	.25	
5. Perceived understanding	38	3.5	1.0					.10	-.40*	.24	.12	
6. Gender ^a	41	1.5	0.5						-.29	.06	-.33*	
7. Age	41	30.2	7.1							.03	.12	

8. Duration of residence ^b	40	6.1	1.8	.28
9. Subjective SES	41	3.0	0.9	

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

^a 0= male, 1= female/diverse ^b 1=half a year, 2=one year, 3=two years, 4=three years, 5=four years, 6=five years, 7=more than five years

3.2 Power analyses for subsequent analyses

As to calculate sample sizes for a sufficiently powered analysis (95%) of our hypotheses, we used predictor correlations with the outcome socio-cultural adaptation. An estimation of sample sizes using G*Power (version 3.1.9.7) for a linear multiple regression with a fixed model and R^2 deviation from zero indicated required sample sizes of $n_1 = 86$ (H1), and respectively $n_2 = 113$ for H2. Thus, our final sample should contain a minimum of 113 participants.

4. Discussion

In a preliminary analysis of young refugees' responses to an online survey, we examined interrelations of national identification, mutual understanding within, as well as number of inter-ethnic friendships with socio-cultural adaptation. Prior to an analysis of the hypothesized linear regression models, we applied correlational analyses. As expected within H1, we found a positive interrelation between the number of inter-ethnic friendships and socio-cultural adaptation. Yet we did not find significant connections between national identification and the number of inter-ethnic friendships as it was present in other studies (e.g., Jugert et al., 2018), or respectively socio-cultural adaptation (Jugert & Titzmann, 2020). As for our second hypothesis, we did not find significant correlations between felt or perceived understanding and socio-cultural adaptation.

Although our research design and sample size do not allow to draw causal conclusions yet, our results enable an initial insight into young refugees' perspectives on inter-ethnic friendships and socio-cultural adaptation. Preliminary correlational analyses so far do not support our assumptions, still we found several interesting interrelations. Apparently, both felt and perceived understanding were connected to a higher number of inter-ethnic friendships. Thus, integrating mutual understanding into theoretical frameworks on inter-ethnic friendships appears a promising approach (Jugert et al., 2013).

However, interpretability of our findings remains limited. Power analyses suggested a minimum sample of 113 participants for a sufficiently powered examination of the hypothesized effects. Also, descriptive analyses of demographic background variables indicated that older refugees had also felt addressed by our inquiry. To avoid reducing the small sample further, we included older participants into our analysis. This likely impacted our results, as higher reports of felt and perceived understanding were connected to younger age. In subsequent analysis, an increased sample size should allow to control for age effects. Furthermore, we might as well apply a translated version of our questionnaire in order to reach younger, more recently arrived refugees as well.

In our presentation, we will be able to present an up-to-date, and higher-powered version of present analyses. Especially the findings on felt and perceived understanding will inform following research on the dynamics of inter-ethnic friendships. In subsequent studies, we delve deeper into mutual processes within inter-ethnic friendships. By drawing on research on inter-ethnic contact (e.g., Holoien et al., 2015), we apply a dyadic research design to deepen the understanding of optimal conditions for initial contacts between young refugees and native peers. Additionally, we apply a social network analysis of mutual understanding and inter-ethnic friendship in a sample of approximately 450 Thuringian students, drawn from a sample of 16 secondary schools.

Although researchers agree on the beneficial role of inter-ethnic friendships for the reduction of intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), and acculturative adaptation (Jugert & Titzmann, 2020), pre-conditions of optimal initial contact and persisting friendship require further research. In this preliminary examination of young refugees' responses, as well as in our subsequent studies, we aim to fill this gap. Furthermore, shifting focus from an individualistic approach to a relational perspective on young refugees' adaptation process appears a promising gateway (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2020). By doing so, our research might further inform professionals in the design of school or social work interventions with a clearer focus on intergroup and peer relations.

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