

Social Integration of Syrian Refugees in Germany: Challenges and Approaches

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Submitted on 24.10.2020

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Introduction

After almost four years of the large influx of asylum seekers to Germany in 2015, while some Syrian refugees have been able to learn the German language, find a job, resume their studies, and overcome different daily difficulties related to basic needs, many still face various challenges related to social integration in German society.

This paper presents the outputs of a workshop, “*Identity and Integration*”, developed by the author in cooperation with colleagues in the framework of several socio-political projects¹ related to issues of social integration of (Syrian) refugees in Germany. The workshop was held ten times between 2017 and 2019 in Berlin and Hannover; on all occasions most participants were Syrians².

After presenting the background and conceptual approach of the workshop, this paper will provide an insight into how Syrian refugees perceive the issue of integration in the German context, existing challenges and best approaches to deal with this subject from their perspective. Finally, some elaborations and remarks from the author conclude the paper.

Workshop Background and Discussion Questions

Ever since the large influx of asylum seekers to Germany began in 2015, asylum policies have featured prominently and consistently in the national political debate. This issue has changed the political landscape in Germany (e.g. the rise of the conservative right-wing party - the Alternative for Germany - AfD), and raised several socio-political questions related to future of the country³. The German government has also taken additional measures to support the integration of refugees in Germany apart from essential humanitarian support. These pertain not only to system-integration (e.g. provision of accommodation, language⁴ and job/study

¹ The author would like to thank Katrin Gildemeister from Hiwarat e.V. (Formaly: Friedenskreis Syiren e.V.); Haytham Hmeidan and Dr. Azzam Amin from Citizen Diplomats for Syria e.V.; Alexander Ritzmann, Yousef Wehbe, Lama Ahmad, Dr. Caroline von der Heyden and Alexandra Korn from Project Augenhöhe/ Brandenburgisches Institut für Gesellschaft und Sicherheit. The author would like also to thank Johanna Hase, Hannah Newbery and Helene Michou for their feedback on a first draft of this paper.

² The workshop was developed at the beginning to discuss issues of social integration among Syrian refugees in Germany. The same workshop with minor adjustments was implemented later in projects targeting Arabic-speaking refugees, but most participants were Syrians.

³ See for example, the special report of The Economist “The New Germans”, 14.04.2018. <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2018/04/12/how-germany-and-the-germans-have-changed> (accessed 2018.12.25).

⁴ For example, integration-courses were offered even for some asylum-seekers before getting the residence permit. “Asylbewerber mit einer guten Bleibeperspektive”. <http://www.bamf.de/DE/Infothek/FragenAntworten/IntegrationskurseAsylbewerber/integrationskurse-asylbewerber-node.html> (accessed 2019.07.27).

programmes, etc.), but also to social integration (e.g. values and norms of the society, participation and social coexistence). In its recent integration strategy, the German government has even considered integration as a two-way process (BMAS 2019).

Despite these measures, a negative perception of the integration topic has developed among many Syrian refugees during the last four years. The German government offers integration courses (language and cultural orientation courses), which are obligatory for most foreigners⁵. The course consists of a language course (600 – 900 hours) and an orientation course (60 hours) in which the following issues are addressed: 1) the German legal system, history and culture; 2) rights and obligations in Germany; 3) ways of co-existing in society; and 4) important values in German society (BAMF). The negative perception of these courses is due mainly to the frontal methods of instruction whereby refugees are told what integration means and how the “German” values and norms should be understood, without offering space for discussion. In fact, many refugees do not take integration courses seriously; they are considered merely a formal procedure that should be fulfilled in order to obtain the “Living in Germany” integration certificate. Furthermore, the top-down approaches of government’ employees (i.e. at foreigner offices, job centres and social offices), as well as the asymmetric relations with Germans that many refugees experience, also contributes to their negative perception of the integration issue (Author’s discussions with participants).

All these circumstances made discussing specific issues of social integration with persons concerned timely and relevant. In order to do so, the workshop: *Identity and Integration* was developed and implemented by the author in the framework of several socio-political projects related to the issues of social integration of refugees in Germany. The workshop took 6 to 7 hours and targeted between 12-15 participants (60% male and 40% female). The language of discussion was Arabic to create safe-space in which participants could discuss the issues among themselves (i.e. peer-to-peer) without any hesitation to express opinion due to linguistic barriers or fear of judgment⁶. In the workshops, the following main questions were discussed:

- How do (Syrian) refugees perceive the issue of social integration?
- What are the challenges that (Syrian) refugees face in relation to their integration into the culture(s) of the host society/community?
- What are the approaches and activities that might help in addressing these challenges?

⁵ „§44a - Verpflichtung zur Teilnahme an einem Integrationskurs“ Aufenthaltsgesetz: Kapitel 3 – Integration (§§43 45a) <https://dejure.org/gesetze/AufenthG/44a.html> (accessed 2019.07.27).

⁶ In some cases where German guests participated in the workshop, the power relations and group dynamics changed. This affected remarkably the level of discussion (Author’s observation at the workshops).

Conceptual Approach: Identity and Integration

Given that the concepts of social integration and culture vary greatly from one context to another (Ager and Strange 2008), the author decided to include the aspect of identity as a cross-cutting concept and in order to encourage participants in the workshop to talk about their personal experiences. For Erikson, the sense of identity is “a *subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity*” (1968, 19). In other words, the identity formation is based on a continuous process of synthesis of past experience (i.e. what one has been in the past) and future expectation (i.e. what one anticipates being in the future) (ibid, 310). As Erikson put it, “Identity...contains a complementarity of past and future both in the individual and in society: it links the actuality of a living past with that of a promising future” (ibid). Furthermore, defining oneself and its meaning (i.e. the sense of uniqueness and inner harmony) involves interaction with other people and social groups, as well as their ideals and values (i.e. the entire social context). Identity, as a process which includes individual and collective identities, is the result of “the dialectical interplay of processes of internal and external definition” (Jenkins 2008, 46).

The Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1981) further holds that “no man is an island” and “no social group is an island” (Tajfel 1981, 258). The formation process of personal and social identity is related to social categorization (i.e. as a system of orientation which helps to create and define the individual’s place in society), as well as the social comparison and psychological group distinction (i.e. building the ingroup-we versus the outgroup-they) (Tajfel 1981). This theoretical model is not only helpful for understanding how stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination or identity conflicts emerge, but also how human beings form/become a group (e.g. the “Syrian refugees group”), in the sense of being perceived by the other as having common characteristics (positive or negative ones), and simultaneously by the members of the group themselves as having a common situation and fate. These strengthen the sense of belonging to the group and thus affect the perceptions, beliefs and behaviours of group members.

These aspects of identity formation - the state of self-sameness which is reflected in the need for preserving one’s own identity, and the state of continuity and synthesis which is reflected in the need for integrating with other members of society- was linked with the integration definition by John Berry. According to Berry, integration happens, “when there is an interest (from migrants) in both maintaining one’s original culture, while in daily interactions with other groups”. In this situation, “there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the

same time seeking to participate as an integral part of the larger social network” (1997, 9). To further clarify the state of integration, Berry differentiates with the following related concepts: *Assimilation*: “when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures” (ibid.); *Separation/Segregation*: “when individuals place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others” (ibid.); and *Marginalisation*: “when there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss), and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination)” (ibid.). (See figure 2)

In the context of identity formation and social integration, the concept of culture is understood as a significant element in creating or affecting the identity of individuals and society (i.e. Kultur als Identitätsstiftendes Element). It is an orientation system that includes traditions, norms, values, public order and forms of institutions that impacts perceptions, beliefs and behaviours of individuals and groups (Thomas et al. 2005). In other words, culture is the means by which people “communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz 1973, 89). It is “the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action” (ibid, 145).

For addressing the main questions of the workshop, the following steps were taken. Given that the integration topic is perceived negatively by many refugees, creating safe-spaces in which they can exchange ideas and experiences among themselves (i.e. peer-to-peer) was essential. To do this, the identity topic was chosen as an entry point for issues of social integration. More precisely, through starting with the following exercise (participants were asked to write down quickly and without thinking who they are – see figure 1), participants were encouraged to talk about the changing aspects of their personal and social identity, as well as the shifts in how they define their identity between country of origin and host-country and in relation to the experience of seeking asylum and living in the new society.

In a second stage, the following questions of Berry were raised for discussion: “Is it considered to be of value to maintain the (original) cultural identity and characteristics?” or “Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with other groups?” (1997, 10) (See figure 2). Through

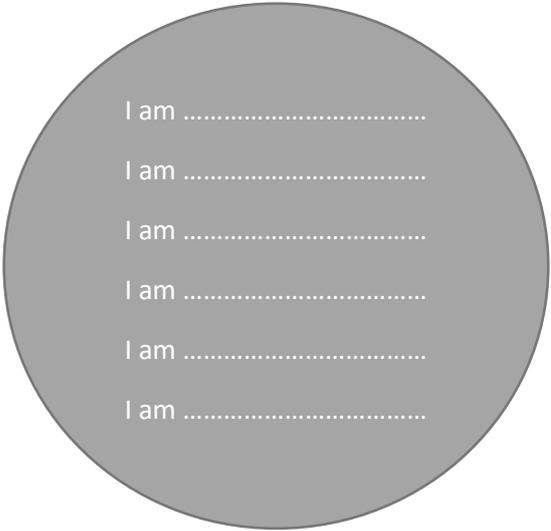


Figure 1: I am Exercise

considering these questions, the different perceptions (how one understands social integration and the related concepts), positions (if one sees herself/himself integrated, assimilated, separated or marginalized), and personal strategies (how oneself and the other refugees deal with key issues) have been identified. In the last stage, challenges of social integration in Germany and approaches to deal with them were discussed.

		Issue 1: Is it considered to be of value to maintain the (original) cultural identity and characteristics?	
		Yes \longleftrightarrow No	
Issue 2: Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with other groups?	Yes \updownarrow	Integration	Assimilation
	No	Separation/Segregation	Marginalization

Figure 2: Acculturation Strategies (Author’s illustration, adapted from Berry 1997, 10)

Perception of Social Integration among Syrian Refugees

First, it is important to mention that many Syrian refugees refuse the term ‘integration’, as it is perceived as a one-way process: assimilation. As previously mentioned, the frontal methods of instruction implemented in integration courses, the top-down approaches of the government’s employees, as well the asymmetric relations with Germans that Syrians experience in different contexts, have had negative impacts on the social integration of many Syrians. The relations of many Syrians with Germans (even the ones who helped them) were based to some extent on a top-down dynamic (i.e. the poor refugee whom I should help and explain to her/him how things are done here). Thus, many prefer using different terminologies (e.g. inclusion) when discussing or addressing the issue of integration.

Apart from the terminology itself, most workshop participants agreed on the importance of preserving several or at least some aspects of their culture of origin, while seeking interaction with the host society and increasing their knowledge of its culture. Some stressed that one should be selective in choosing, as one cannot accept everything, and some values contradict their beliefs generally. At the same time, it was emphasized that one should be flexible in being open to new values and norms, even if one might not be used to them in the country of origin. As some participants put it, it might be a matter of time or experience to change such kinds of

perceptions and beliefs for many refugees. For example, some participants explained how they changed their perception about homosexuality after interacting with homosexuals who helped them with issues like translation and finding accommodation. Others explained how they could not imagine discussing the issue of homosexuality before, and how they started to acknowledge the rights of homosexuals, although it does not mean that they are prepared for standing up for them.

Workshop participants also explained how the experience in Germany might be a culture shock for some refugees, as they experienced a radical change that many were not ready for – and indeed, in some cases, did not even want. It was also stressed that the fear of assimilation, especially at the beginning, made some reluctant to interact with members of the host society, which in turn made them follow radical ways to preserve their culture of origin. This can be seen particularly among families, who are afraid of ‘losing’ their children due to the different values and beliefs that they are exposed to in their daily interactions in German society. Finally, it was highlighted how prejudices from both sides (Germans as well as (Syrian) refugees) have constituted a hindrance in encouraging communication and interaction with each other.

Challenges of Social Integration

In addition to familiar issues related to basic needs, like finding accommodation, finding suitable job/study opportunities or enrolling children in school, which are related more to system-integration and were considered the first steps for social integration by participants, the following challenges were mentioned:

- Difficulties in learning the German language which represent a significant barrier for understating bureaucratic procedures surrounding asylum law and social assistance as well as for communication. Not speaking German well contributes to asymmetric relations between refugees and Germans.
- The different traditions, norms and laws in Germany due to the differences in the social structure (individualistic vs. collectivistic society), political system (federal parliamentary vs. centralized presidential) and rule of law (prevailing vs. absent) comparing with the origin-country.
- Difficulties in getting clear information regarding rights and duties. Although a lot of information is available online in Arabic, it seems that many Syrian refugees still depend on informal sources (i.e. word of mouth, friends or/and social media) to get information.
- Difficulties in establishing continuous contacts (e.g. friendships) with Germans.

- Existing prejudices from both sides (Germans and refugees) and the lack of means to overcome these.

Approaches to Dealing with the Challenges

To deal with the above-mentioned challenges, the following approaches were suggested by the participants:

- Helping in overcoming difficulties related to bureaucratic procedures surrounding asylum law, social assistance or finding job/study opportunities.
- Addressing topics that increase the feeling of security and safety among refugees, like increasing awareness about the rights and duties in Germany and discussing them.
- Promoting sustainable peer-to-peer discussions about the social integration of refugees. Some topics that can be addressed are: 1) identity issue and related challenges in exile, 2) definition(s) of culture and ways for dealing with stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination and racism (e.g. workshops on how to deal with discrimination and racism in Germany), 3) political and social system and rule of law, 4) freedom of expression and belief, 5) citizenship and political participation, 6) gender issues such as gender roles, masculinity, women rights, gender-based domestic violence, and freedom of sexual orientation.
- Approaching families who face family problems with their children partly as a result of the cultural differences between refugee and host communities in Germany.
- Developing educational programs (in the mother language of refugees or in a simple German language) to increase knowledge about German history, the political system and forms of institutional structure, education system and labour law.
- Creating spaces and programs for preserving the culture of origin beyond existing initiatives that reduce its links to religious ones (e.g. supporting alternatives to religious institutions for learning Arabic and preserving the culture).
- Creating platforms that encourage the interaction and discussion with the host society beyond activities related only to food and music. This could be done through organizing activities that introduce the host society to the history and heritage of Syria and highlighting the cultural differences within the refugees' communities (different backgrounds: religious, ethnic, linguistic...etc.).
- Enhancing the active cooperation and communication between refugees and Germans/locals. It was highlighted how important it is to achieve a kind of equal relationship (on eye-to-eye level) between both sides. To overcome asymmetric

relationships, some stressed how the host society should accept and deal with newcomers (refugees or migrants) as equal human beings. This would contribute to building bridges between people.

- Encouraging initiatives from Germans that enhance communication and interaction. Some stressed how showing openness from the side of the host society (which many Syrian refugees miss) might help in generating a positive attitude to deal with prejudices.
- Organizing visits to governmental institutions to encounter them from a different perspective, beyond the negative experiences related to daily challenges (e.g. bureaucratic procedures).
- Encouraging the media to introduce positive experiences of refugees that might help to decrease the negative images often broadcasted, and to motivate other refugees for integration. Introducing positive experiences, however, should not produce models of the ‘successfully’ and ‘unsuccessfully’ integrated refugee. One should always consider that challenges of refugees vary from one context to another.

Conclusion

Despite German governmental and community efforts to support the integration process of refugees both at system and social level, many Syrian refugees still face significant challenges related to social integration in Germany. Those that feature prominently include learning the German language, establishing friendships, participating effectively in society, and dealing with cultural differences. Although the German government has considered the integration process as a two-way process, the perception is still that of a one-way process: that is, *assimilation* by many Syrian refugees due to the top-down approach of the German government. The often-established asymmetric relations at the social level further contribute to this negative perception.

However, as suggested by the workshops’ participants, following approaches such as creating safe-spaces for peer-to-peer discussions on issues of identity and social integration, increasing awareness about the rights and duties in Germany as well as knowledge about the German history and society, supporting platforms for genuine interaction and exchange between refugees and Germans, and encouraging active cooperation and communication at eye level, might all be helpful in addressing the challenges.

Specific elements of the admittedly broad findings presented in this paper merit further study. For instance, the challenges faced by Syrian refugees might vary greatly from one context to another (i.e. varied living situation in urban/rural areas or in apartments/refugee camps, different family situation and gender, various social/educational backgrounds, different experiences and situations in Syria and future opportunities in Germany, etc.). The integration strategies might also vary from one individual to another depending on her/his manners in dealing with various socio-psychological factors related to identity (re)formation (e.g. label of refugee, experiences of prejudice/discrimination/exclusion or of extra empathy/recognition, media coverage of refugees' issues, existing other refugees groups, getting continuously bad news from Syria, emerging Syrian diaspora groups in Germany).

Finally, it is important to stress the following points for a comprehensive social integration approach:

In discussing issues of identity and social integration, it is important to avoid culturalization of the topic (i.e. German values and culture vs. refugees' values and culture). Instead, one should consider these issues with greater context specificity.

To achieve a long-term peaceful coexistence there is a need to shift the focus from only understanding the others to understanding oneself, as well as the others. Thus, it is important to combine these peer-to-peer discussions with dialogue forums held at eye level with Germans/other locals, in which questions related to peaceful coexistence can be addressed.

One should not ignore the psychological situation of refugees (e.g. trauma of war and/or asylum seeking, label of refugee, feelings of alienation, waiting for family reunification). Therefore, following psychologically sensitive and participatory approaches that focus on the individual to start with is essential. Supporting refugees in finding their own way in the new country and how they can participate in society is key to engaging them as active citizens in the long-term.

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