# Migrant Categorizations and European Public Opinion:

# Diverging Attitudes Towards Immigrants and Refugees

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# Migrant Categorizations and European Public Opinion: Diverging Attitudes Towards Immigrants and Refugees

Abstract: In recent years, European media and public discourse have been increasingly categorizing newcomers using terminology like 'immigrants' and 'refugees.' The aim of this practice is to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate newcomers in the wake of the 2015 'refugee crisis' in Europe. Drawing on data from an online survey in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Sweden (n = 6,000) in September and October of 2017, this article investigates how the use of these categories relates to public opinion on 'immigrants' and 'refugees.' Findings show that people hold more positive attitudes towards 'refugees' than towards 'immigrants', a process which is likely driven by media framing. Attitude discrepancies within 'immigrant' and 'refugee' categories are also investigated, as categorical fetishism causes further differentiation of attitudes within these groups. Public opinion differences within 'immigrants' and 'refugees' are found along three cleavages: ethnicity, the economic situation of the origin country, and region of origin. Newcomers with the same ethnicity (vs. a different ethnicity), from 'rich' countries (vs. 'poor' countries), and from European countries (vs. non-European countries) are preferred in both categories. With these findings, this article reveals important aspects of the influence of migrant categorizations on public opinion towards vulnerable groups of newcomers.

Keywords: Immigrants; refugees; migrant categorizations; labelling; framing; Europe; refugee crisis

## Introduction

Currently, Europe is dealing with one of the largest refugee crises since World War II. As conflicts in the Middle East and Africa intensify, an increasing number of citizens from war-torn countries embark on a risky journey to Europe. European countries are under pressure to cope with the large number of incoming refugees, as public opinion on this group is increasingly polarizing (Leeper 2014). In addition, Western Europe has welcomed growing numbers of immigrants – also categorized as economic migrants - since the beginning of the 21st century (Van den Broucke et al. 2015). Recent studies demonstrate that a considerable number of Western Europeans hold quite negative attitudes[1] towards newcomers (Ceobanu and Escandell 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Jacobs, Hooghe, and de Vroome 2017; Mayda 2006; Meuleman, Davidov, and Billiet 2009; O'Rourke and Sinnott 2006; Rustenbach 2010).

Since the beginning of the refugee crisis[2], several European leaders have used the terminology of 'economic migrants' and 'refugees' to cast doubt on the legitimacy of newcomers' claims to international protection. Refugees in dire need of this protection are dismissed as economic migrants who are seeking a better life by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and former Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, amongst others (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). This has been accompanied by intensifying media and political framing which suggests that even if these recent newcomers really do need international protection, they should settle in the first safe country they arrive in (Kuschminder and Koser 2016). Newcomers are mostly represented in a negative or stereotypical way in news media. When considering the

[1] Fishbein and Ajzen (1977, 6) describe an attitude as "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object".

[2] The term 'refugee crisis' is used in this study to refer to the period beginning in January 2015. We are aware that the term 'crisis' is not neutral. It is nevertheless used to locate this work in the discourse evolving around this catchphrase in the media, the public, and in academia.

representation of immigrants, media often link them to criminal activities and portray them as intruders (Jacobs, Meeusen, and d'Haenens 2016; Van Gorp 2005). Refugees are often represented as threatening the European way of life, and as an economic and social burden to society, while at the same time emphasizing the dire situation that forced them to flee (Bradimore and Bauder 2011; Goodman et al. 2015). These negative representations have likely resulted in concurrent shifts in public opinion on newcomers, evidenced by the recent increase in xenophobia and islamophobia across Europe (Wieviorka 2018). In short, using different labels to describe individuals on the move has become politicised, especially in the context of Europe's recent 'migration crisis' (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

The fact that the politization of these labels has been accompanied by a polarization of attitudes on these groups in Europe is not coincidental. Using insights from discursive psychology, which departs from the assumption that language use is related to social actions (e.g., attitude formation), and social identity theory, this study relates the use of categories such as 'immigrant' and 'refugee' to attitudes of the general population on these groups in four European countries: Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden. These labels have powerful implications as they contain assumptions on the legitimacy of a newcomer's desire to settle in a country. This study contributes to the sociological and psychological literature on the use of migrant categorizations, while at the same time expanding this field by relating the use of such labels or categories to public opinion preferences. Although the use of migrant categorizations has been investigated previously, the preferred methodology was mostly qualitative in nature and investigated the opinions of newcomers themselves. Here, we consider the general population's preferences using quantitative methods.

**Categories of Newcomers**

Following the 2015 migration crisis, Europe is currently dealing with large numbers of newcomers. Tensions within and between European countries run high following several

(violent) incidents involving refugees, but also due to the perceived (supra-)national economic and cultural cost of allowing this group to settle in Europe (Goodman et al. 2015). This negative perception of economic costs is particularly present in North-Western European countries with a strong welfare system because many newcomers receive shelter, clothing, education, health benefits, etc., thereby accessing social welfare funds. Additionally, their limited degree of labour market participation – although often imposed by the respective welfare states via denying even temporary work permits – is perceived as 'not returning the favour' (Puschmann et al. 2019). The perception of a cultural cost originates from the fact that a large majority of newcomers are Muslim and hold different value orientations to non-Muslim Europeans on gender equality, sexual orientation, and the separation of church and state. This has caused intergroup tensions on several occasions, and incidents such as the mass assault on women during New Year's Eve 2016 in Cologne, Germany feed into fears that Western culture is incompatible with the newcomers' culture (Puschmann et al. 2019). These negative perceptions are fuelled by media coverage on this subject which often emphasizes these economic and cultural costs (De Cock et al. 2018).

As a response to the growing uncertainty concerning newcomers, media and politicians have increasingly begun to place them into distinctive categories such as 'migrant' and 'refugee', amongst others. The idea behind these social constructs is to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate newcomers, and to demarcate "the population" from "the other", though reality is much more complex than such categories make it seem (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Foucault et al. 2007; Lee and Nerghes 2018). Following the signing of the Refugee Convention in 1951, a refugee is legally defined as "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group" (United Nations 1951, 14). Migrants are considered individuals who

decide to move based on their free will, for reasons of personal convenience, and without the intervention of an external compelling reason such as war or a natural disaster (UNESCO 2017, para. 3). However, these definitions and categories are, as is the case for all social constructs, somewhat arbitrary. They are unable to grasp the complex realities of migrant motives and movements across time and cultures. It cannot be denied, however, that the use of these categories does have important legal and social consequences the groups involved. Though the Refugee Convention was important in developing a universal understanding of the 'characteristics' of refugees, distinctions between groups of newcomers were already being made long before the signing of this document. These definitions were somewhat similar to the current UN-definitions, as refugees were considered to leave their home country because of political events, while economic migrants moved for economic reasons (Skran and Daughtry 2007).

Despite the shortcomings of such categorisations, it cannot be denied that their use has legal and social repercussions for newcomers themselves, and that it influences public opinion towards these groups. Legally, some newcomers - depending on their label - are entitled to protection, rights and other resources, while others are excluded. Those officially acknowledged as 'refugees' are in most cases the beneficiaries of such rights, but it has become increasingly difficult to officially belong to this group (Sajjad 2018). The case of Afghan refugees is an example of this. Since the war in Afghanistan erupted in 2001, Afghan refugees have consistently fled to Europe in large numbers. Even at the time of the refugee crisis in 2015, Afghans represented one of the largest clusters of refugees to arrive in Europe. However, the approval of Afghan asylum applications has decreased drastically over the years, and deportations have increased steadily. In September 2015, 68% of Afghan asylum applications were approved and this decreased to 33% in December 2016. One of the reasons for this was a new risk ratio calculation in 2014, which concluded that the risk of being a victim of the armed

conflict in Afghanistan was at 0.074% which was deemed as too low to apply for asylum. This (arbitrary) calculation delineated Afghanistan as a safe country, making it more difficult for its citizens to be granted asylum in Europe (Sajjad 2018). This case indicates that the label of 'refugee' (as defined in the Refugee Convention) is "highly changeable, dependent on context and inextricably linked to ideas of citizenship, the state, and understandings of the 'self' and the 'other' in any given period of time" (Gauci, Giuffré, and Tsourdi 2015; Sajjad 2018, 46). By categorizing newcomers into categories, we engage in a political process which posits that certain newcomers are legitimate and deserving of our aid, while others are not. The criteria on which this process is based are arbitrary, and prone to change (Zetter 2007).

**Categories and Public Opinion**

We use insights of discursive psychology to reflect on the relationship between these labels and public opinion towards newcomers. In the past, scholars in this discipline have found that the way in which newcomers are represented in media and politics has implications on ideas about how they should be treated (Lynn and Lea 2003). The use of such categorizations may encourage specific actions such as discrimination, because "language, thought, and actions are inextricably linked" (Hardy 2003, 19). How is such negative behaviour encouraged? For one, the framing of refugees and migrants in the public debate is generally negative. The process of framing entails that certain aspects of an issue are highlighted or excluded (Iyengar 1987), which impacts the population's attitudes on many issues, including migration (Augoustinos 2001; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; De Coninck et al. 2019; Lee and Nerghes 2018).

When we look at the way refugees and migrants are framed in the context of the refugee crisis, we note four main differences. First, the media's coverage of refugees is episodic, while migration is covered thematically over longer periods of time. The focus on refugees mostly appears during times of crisis (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017). Second, refugees are traditionally framed by media and public discourse as passive and deprived of agency by the

dire situation which forced them to flee (Bradimore and Bauder 2011; Kempadoo 2005). In the years following the refugee crisis, they are increasingly portrayed as threatening the European way of life, and as an economic burden to European welfare states (Goodman et al. 2015): they are framed as "takers" rather than "givers" (Lawlor and Tolley 2017). The picture on migrant framing is somewhat different, as they have long since been portrayed as opportunists, seeking to benefit from a country's welfare arrangements – but not as intensely as refugees since they arrive more incrementally (Bradimore and Bauder 2011; Lawlor and Tolley 2017). This economic dimension is the third key difference in the framing of refugees and migrants, and has been used to delegitimize refugee claims by categorizing them as 'economic migrants' (Greenberg 2000). There are also some similarities in the framing of immigrants and refugees: both are linked to criminal activities and portrayed as intruders, particularly by mass media and politicians (Bradimore and Bauder 2011; Jacobs, Meeusen, and d'Haenens 2016; Van Gorp 2005).

The impact of such frames on public opinion cannot be underestimated. Studies of the effect of news media consumption on migration attitudes have shown that public and commercial broadcasters do not frame newcomers in the same way: public broadcasters are found to be more positive in their representation than commercial broadcasters (Jacobs, Meeusen, and d'Haenens 2016). Public broadcasters utilize more humanitarian and victim frames, provide more context and frequently adopt an individual perspective when reporting on newcomers (Jacobs et al. 2016). When we relate this to public opinion, we observe that audiences who consume news on public broadcasters are more positive in their attitudes than those who consume news on commercial broadcasters (De Coninck et al. 2018; Meeusen and Jacobs 2017). Of course, it is unclear whether the consumption of news media (in)directly impacts attitudes (cultivation theory), or if people choose to consume news which corresponds to their preconceived attitudes (uses & gratifications) (Blumler and Katz 1974; Gerbner 1998).

In any case, there is an association between the way newcomers are represented and public opinion on these newcomers. As numerous labels and categories are applied to newcomers (Apostolova 2017), we investigate to what extent these labels are related to attitudes on these groups. To explain some of the differences in attitudes between groups of newcomers, we do not only consider explanations within discursive psychology, but also insights from the social identity theory.

Discursive psychologists challenge explanations of prejudice that are solely based on the social identity theory. Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed this theory to provide individuals with a framework for understanding how they make sense of their place in society. The scholars assert that people tend to conceptualise themselves and others in terms of social categories rather than as unique individuals. This process of categorisation fosters an inclination to make status-based comparisons whereby the value of any given group or member within it is assessed according to that group's position within the social hierarchy. One's self concept relies upon the individual's view of other people and groups around them, and individuals often employ a range of strategies to achieve positive distinctiveness such as changing social groups, mobilising their group to improve its position or changing one's perspective of their group's position relative to other groups (Haslam 2001). People tend to assign positive characteristics to members of social groups they belong to (in-group favouritism) and negative characteristics to members of social groups they do not belong to (out-group discrimination) (van Klingeren et al. 2015). Billig (2002) challenges these explanations and claims that social identity theory insufficiently considers discourse about race and prejudice in its explanation of these phenomena.

This intergroup dynamic can translate into concerns about possible threats to the interests of their group (Verkuyten 2004). In the literature on group threat theory, a distinction is made between two types of threat: realistic and symbolic. Realistic threat refers to the

competition between groups for scarce resources in society (e.g. jobs, welfare benefits), which stimulates negative prejudice between social groups – particularly from the in-group towards the out-group. This prejudice is more pronounced among individuals in precarious socio-economic positions (Fetzer 2012; Lancee and Pardos-Prado 2013). Symbolic threat refers to the fear that newcomers challenge the cultural identity of the native population. This is defined as the perceived harm by immigrants or refugees with distinct values, norms, and beliefs, and is a major source of prejudice (Ata, Bastian, and Lusher 2009; Riek, Mania, and Gaertner 2006; Zárate et al 2004).

We believe that discursive psychology, social identity theory, and group threat theory can provide complimentary explanations for differences in attitudes. Given the literature cited above, we expect that people hold more positive attitudes towards refugees than they do towards migrants. The reason for this is that migrants have long since been negatively framed as taking advantage of European welfare states' benefits, while the framing of refugees also focuses on their dire situation (Bradimore and Bauder 2011; Sajjad 2018). This leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Attitudes towards refugees are more positive than attitudes towards immigrants.

However, we are also interested in investigating differences within categories. After all, newcomers in Europe are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of their country of origin and a host of other characteristics (Collyer and de Haas 2012). Given the emphasis of framing on potential negative outcomes of migration related to the economic burden and cultural incompatibility, it is possible that further differences in attitudes can be distinguished within migrant categories. Because of the emphasis on economic elements, we expect more positive attitudes exist towards immigrants or refugees from wealthier countries, as they may be expected to hold more economic capital than immigrants or refugees from poorer countries. In line with the social identity theory, we also expect people to hold more positive attitudes

towards immigrants or refugees with the same ethnicity as most of the native population as opposed to those with a different ethnicity, and from countries within Europe rather than from countries outside Europe.

*Hypothesis 2:* Attitudes towards immigrants or refugees from wealthy countries are more positive than attitudes towards immigrants or refugees from poorer countries.

*Hypothesis 3:* Attitudes towards immigrants or refugees with the same ethnicity as most of the population are more positive than attitudes towards immigrants or refugees with a different ethnicity than most of the population.

*Hypothesis 4:* Attitudes towards immigrants or refugees from European countries are more positive than attitudes towards immigrants or refugees from non-European countries.

**Data and Methodology**

We distributed an online questionnaire to adults aged 18 to 65 in Belgium, Sweden, France, and the Netherlands, in September and October of 2017. The survey was fielded for three weeks, at which point a sample size of 6,000 respondents (1,500 per country) was reached. We opted for an online questionnaire because of its (cost) efficiency, and country selection was based on convenience: the Belgian polling agency we worked with has a strong presence in the four countries under study, which meant we could limit the cost of the study and still receive a large dataset. The polling agency drew a quota sample out of its available panels, with heterogeneity in terms of age and gender. The response rate was about 35 per cent[3] and responses were weighted by gender and age to ensure that the data was representative for these characteristics within each country.[4] Respondents were contacted through e-mail with the

[3] The response rate was calculated by taking the number of completed responses, dividing this by the number of emails sent out to potential respondents and multiplying this result by 100.

[4] For more information on the dataset, please consult De Coninck, d'Haenens, and Joris (2019).

request to cooperate in a study. No specific subject was specified in the e-mail to respondents to avoid priming. The survey itself was distributed via the polling agency's own survey tool, and in the official language of the country or region (either Dutch, French, or Swedish) that respondents resided in. Translations of the survey were carried out by professional translators, ensuring that the terminology used in the questions is considered 'everyday language' by the respondents. Respondents were unable to skip questions, but some did have a 'No answer'-option. However, the items on attitudes towards immigrants and toward refugees, which will be expanded upon in the following section, did not. Each question in the survey was presented on a different page, and respondents did not have the option to return to previous questions and change their answer.

### *Measures*

*Attitudes Towards Immigrants and Towards Refugees*

To accurately measure differences in public opinion on immigrants and on refugees, we adapted a scale previously used in rotating modules of the European Social Survey. This module was created to measure migration attitudes and was included in Round 1 (2002) and Round 7 (2014). The original scale consists of six items asking which groups of immigrants should be allowed to come and live in the country: "Immigrants of the same race or ethnicity as most of [country's] population", "Immigrants of a different race or ethnicity as most of [country's] population", "Immigrants of the richer countries in Europe", "Immigrants of the poorer countries in Europe", "Immigrants of the richer countries outside Europe", and "Immigrants of the poorer countries outside Europe". Answer categories ranged from 1 (allow none) to 4 (allow many). We presented the scale in its original form and added an extra item concerning immigrants from Muslim countries. The reason for the inclusion of this item lies in the fact that most newcomers entering Europe in the current crisis originate from Syria, Iraq,

or Afghanistan – predominantly Muslim countries (Pew Research Center 2017). To measure attitudes on refugees we presented the same scale but switched out the word "immigrant" for "refugee". Before completing this block of items, we presented respondents with the UN-definition of immigrants and of refugees that can be found in the introduction of this article. We clearly highlighted these definitions so that respondents across all four countries would have a uniform understanding of each group when completing the questionnaire. The items on attitudes towards immigrants and refugees were not on successive pages: several questions were programmed in between them in order to avoid straight-lining[5] as much as possible.

*Demographics*

Respondents were asked to indicate gender (0 = female, 1 = male); age is measured by asking for the birth year, and automatically calculating the respondent's current age; religious denomination was categorized in four sections (Christian, Muslim, other denomination, not religious); educational attainment is measured by the highest level of education (no or primary education, secondary education, tertiary education);. Migration background was constructed based on the (grand)parents' country of birth. To construct this variable, respondents were first asked to indicate (in a drop-down menu with 250 options) in which country each parent and grandparent was born. If both parents, one parent and at least two grandparents, or more than two grandparents of a respondent were born outside of the country the respondent currently resides in, they were considered to have a migration background. Depending on the country of origin, a distinction was made between respondents with a European and a non-European

[5] Straight-lining describes the tendency of respondents to select the same answer option for a set of items, usually in blocks of items, independent of the content of the item. The appellation 'straight-lining' originates from the appearance of this answering behavior: a straight line as the viewer reads down a set of items (Cole, McCormick, and Gonyea 2012).

background. News media consumption was measured by asking about the number of days in the past week that respondents consumed news via the public television broadcaster, commercial television broadcasters, quality newspapers, and tabloids (1 = never, 8 = every day). For print media, potential issues arose regarding social desirability bias and ideologically biased interpretations when it came to 'quality newspapers' and 'tabloids', as people may have different conceptions about the 'quality' of newspapers. For this reason, we provided a country-specific selection of newspapers to choose from - without referring to them as tabloids or quality newspapers - and coded them as such afterwards. As for televised media, we provided relevant country-specific examples of each type of broadcaster so that respondents could easily distinguish between media brands. We also asked to what extent respondents were exposed to news about refugees in the past year (1 = never, 6 = very often). An overview can be found in Table 1.

***Analytic Strategy***

We are interested in investigating differences in public opinion towards immigrants and towards refugees, but also in public opinion differences between subcategories within each of these groups. Due to the ordinal nature of the items that measure attitudes in this study, a statistical assumption is violated: these data are not normally distributed. With this point in mind, the most suitable test to investigate attitude differences between groups using this type of non-normal ordinal data is the Wilcoxon signed-rank sum test, which allows for the comparison of two ordinal measures and is the non-parametric equivalent to the paired samples t-test.

Table 1. Socio-demographics of total sample

| | Frequency | Per cent | Mean (SD) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Age (N = 6,000)** | - | - | 43.37 (13.26) |
| **Gender (N = 6,000)** | | | |
| Male | 2,974 | 49.6 | 0.49 (0.50) |
| Female | 3,026 | 50.4 | 0.51 (0.50) |
| **Migration background (N = 5,803)** | | | |
| No migration background | 4,903 | 84.5 | 0.84 (0.36) |
| European migration background | 515 | 8.9 | 0.09 (0.28) |
| Non-European migration background | 385 | 6.6 | 0.07 (0.25) |
| **Educational attainment (N = 5,969)** | | | |
| No education/Primary education | 292 | 4.9 | 0.05 (0.22) |
| Secondary education | 3,078 | 51.6 | 0.52 (0.50) |
| Tertiary education | 2,599 | 43.5 | 0.44 (0.50) |
| **Religious denomination (N = 5,992)** | | | |
| Christian | 2,642 | 44.1 | 0.44 (0.50) |
| Muslim | 169 | 2.8 | 0.03 (0.17) |
| Other | 458 | 7.6 | 0.08 (0.27) |
| Not religious | 2,723 | 45.5 | 0.46 (0.50) |
| **News media consumption (N = 6,000)** | | | |
| Public broadcaster | - | - | 4.10 (2.71) |
| Commercial broadcaster | - | - | 4.00 (2.67) |
| Quality newspapers | - | - | 1.52 (1.22) |
| Tabloids | - | - | 2.03 (1.64) |
| **Exposure to refugee news (N = 6,000)** | - | - | 4.25 (1.33) |

To expand on these results, we conduct three ordinal regressions with mean scores on attitudes towards immigrants and refugees and the difference between these attitudes as the dependent variables. This last indicator was calculated by calculating the mean scores of the 7 items on attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, and then subtracting the immigrant score from the

refugee score. If this variable has a positive score, it indicates that people prefer refugees, and if the score is negative, then immigrants are preferred. The demographic characteristics (see Table 1) and fixed country effects are included as independent variables. Although our cross-national data seemingly lends itself to hierarchical or multi-level analyses, calculations show an intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) of .03, which suggests that there is insufficient variance at the country level to warrant multilevel modeling (Hox, Moerbeek, and van de Schoot 2017). To investigate hypotheses 2 through 4, we conduct additional Wilcoxon signed-rank tests to gauge which groups of immigrants or refugees are preferred over others. Pairwise deletion was utilized to maximize the number of respondents in the analyses, although the number of missing values were limited since respondents were unable to skip survey questions.

**Results**

The results from the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests (see Table 2) indicate that significant differences in attitudes can be found in six out of seven pairs, with refugees generally preferred to immigrants. This is the case for refugees with a different ethnicity than most of the native population (Pair 2), refugees of poor European countries (Pair 4), refugees of poor non-European countries (Pair 6), and refugees from Muslim countries (Pair 7). The reverse pattern can be found in attitudes towards immigrants of the same ethnicity as most of the native population (Pair 1) and immigrants of rich European countries (Pair 3); they are preferred to refugees with the same ethnicity and refugees from rich European countries. Attitudes towards immigrants and refugees of rich non-European countries (Pair 5) do not differ significantly. The conclusion based on these results is that refugees are preferred over immigrants in most cases, which corresponds to a partial confirmation of the first hypothesis (H1: Attitudes towards refugees are more positive than attitudes towards immigrants).

Table 2. Wilcoxon signed-rank test results for differences in attitudes between immigrants and refugees

| | M | SD | M | SD | 95% CI mean difference | Z |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Immigrants of same race | | Refugees of same race | | | |
| | 2.76 | .87 | 2.74 | .91 | .00 - .04 | -2.46* |
| Pair 2 | Immigrants of different race | | Refugees of different race | | | |
| | 2.48 | .89 | 2.53 | .93 | -.07 - -.04 | -7.03*** |
| Pair 3 | Immigrants of rich European countries | | Refugees of rich European countries | | | |
| | 2.65 | .89 | 2.58 | .94 | .05 - .08 | -7.30*** |
| Pair 4 | Immigrants of poor European countries | | Refugees of poor European countries | | | |
| | 2.52 | .90 | 2.56 | .94 | -.05 - -.02 | -4.24*** |
| Pair 5 | Immigrants of rich non-European countries | | Refugees of rich non-European countries | | | |
| | 2.50 | .90 | 2.49 | .95 | -.01 - .02 | -.57 |
| Pair 6 | Immigrants of poor non-European countries | | Refugees of poor non-European countries | | | |
| | 2.41 | .92 | 2.48 | .96 | -.09 - -.06 | -9.88*** |
| Pair 7 | Immigrants of Muslim countries | | Refugees of Muslim countries | | | |
| | 2.32 | .97 | 2.36 | 1.00 | -.06 - -.03 | -5.98*** |

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

In Table 3, we get a more in-depth look at several indicators that shape these attitudes, and the difference between them. Educational attainment is positively related to attitudes towards both groups of newcomers, which is in line with many previous studies on this subject: highly educated individuals generally experience less (realistic) threat from newcomers due to their favorable socioeconomic position than the lower educated, who fear the (mostly lower educated) newcomers will compete for the same employment opportunities as them (Ceobanu

and Escandell 2010). As for religious denomination, we find that Muslims and respondents with a non-Christian denomination (e.g., Jews, Hindu's) hold significantly more positive attitudes towards either newcomer group than Christians do. Having a non-European migration background is also relevant, as this characteristic is positively related to attitudes. This is in line with social identity theory, as Muslims and people with a migration background likely identify more with newcomers than Christians or people without a migration background do.

However, none of these indicators explain differences in attitudes between immigrants and refugees. As for news media use, consuming public broadcasting news and quality newspapers is positively associated with attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, while consuming commercial broadcasting news is negatively associated with them. This indicates that the differential framing of newcomers on these different media types may be related to the way people feel about such groups, especially considering the impact it has on the difference in attitudes between groups. Consuming commercial news or reading tabloids leads to a higher preference of immigrants over refugees, while consuming news on public broadcasting is related to a higher preference of refugees over immigrants. Frequently coming across news on refugees is positively related to attitudes, although this effect is more pronounced for refugee attitudes. However, it is also positively related to the difference in attitudes: watching more news on refugees stimulates more positive attitudes towards refugees over immigrants. These findings indicate that the impact of news media use, and the framing of refugees on these media types, cannot be underestimated in explaining attitude differences between immigrants and refugees. Finally, country differences indicate that the French hold more negative attitudes than Belgians, while the Swedes and the Dutch hold more positive attitudes.

Table 3. Ordinal regressions with attitudes towards refugees and immigrants, and the difference between these attitudes, as outcome variables

| | Attitudes towards refugees | Attitudes towards Immigrants | Difference between Attitudes |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Age** | -.01*** | -.01*** | .00 |
| **Gender** | | | |
| Female (Ref.) | - | - | - |
| Male | -.21*** | -.17** | -.12* |
| **Educational attainment** | | | |
| None/Primary education (Ref.) | - | - | - |
| Secondary education | .53*** | .62*** | -.02 |
| Tertiary education | 1.08*** | 1.14*** | .07 |
| **Migration background** | | | |
| No migration background (Ref.) | - | - | - |
| European migration background | .05 | .10 | .01 |
| Non-European migration background | .31** | .35** | .02 |
| **Religious denomination** | | | |
| Christian (Ref.) | - | - | - |
| Muslim | .60*** | .47** | .17 |
| Other | .31** | .28** | .11 |
| Not religious | .04 | -.04 | .07 |
| **News media consumption** | | | |
| Public broadcaster | .08*** | .07*** | .02* |
| Commercial broadcaster | -.10*** | -.08*** | -.05*** |
| Quality newspapers | .13*** | .14*** | .02 |
| Tabloids | -.04* | -.02 | -.04* |
| **Exposure to refugee news** | .09*** | .05** | .06** |
| **Country of residence** | | | |
| Belgium (Ref.) | - | - | - |
| France | -.19** | -.25*** | .15* |
| Netherlands | .15* | .06 | .24** |
| Sweden | .51*** | .53*** | .08 |
| **Nagelkerke $R^2$** | .12 | .12 | .01 |

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. The attitude difference was calculated by subtracting the mean score on immigrant attitudes from the mean score on refugee attitudes. A positive score denotes more positive attitudes towards refugees, a negative score denotes more positive attitudes towards immigrants.

In order to investigate within-group attitude differences, we run additional Wilcoxon signed-rank tests (see Table 4) to compare attitudes towards several categories of immigrants: those with the same ethnicity as the general population vs. those with another ethnicity (Pair 1), from rich countries in Europe vs. poor countries in Europe (Pair 2), from rich countries outside Europe vs. poor countries outside Europe (Pair 3), from rich countries in Europe vs. rich countries outside Europe (Pair 4), and from poor countries in Europe vs. poor countries outside Europe (Pair 5). There are significant differences in the scores for all pairs, illustrating that immigrants from the same ethnicity (as opposed to another ethnicity), from rich countries (as opposed to poor countries), and from European countries (as opposed to non-European countries) are preferred to their counterparts. These results suggest that the categorical fetishism that dominates the current public discourse is reflected in people's preferences towards these (sub)categories, and allows us to confirm *hypothesis 2*, *hypothesis 3*, and *hypothesis 4* – at least as far as attitudes towards (sub)categories of 'immigrants' are concerned.

Table 4. Wilcoxon signed-rank test results for differences in attitudes between immigrant groups

| | M | SD | M | SD | 95% CI mean difference | Z |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Immigrants of same race | | Immigrants of different race | | | |
| | 2.76 | .87 | 2.48 | .89 | .26 - .30 | -29.68*** |
| Pair 2 | Immigrants of rich European countries | | Immigrants of poor European countries | | | |
| | 2.65 | .89 | 2.52 | .90 | .11 - .15 | -12.92*** |
| Pair 3 | Immigrants of rich non-European countries | | Immigrants of poor non-European countries | | | |
| | 2.50 | .90 | 2.41 | .92 | .07 - .11 | -9.29*** |
| Pair 4 | Immigrants of rich European countries | | Immigrants of rich non-European countries | | | |
| | 2.65 | .89 | 2.50 | .90 | .14 - .17 | -21.70*** |
| Pair 5 | Immigrants of poor European countries | | Immigrants of poor non-European countries | | | |
| | 2.52 | .90 | 2.41 | .92 | .10 - .13 | -17.17*** |

Note. ***p < .001.

The results in Table 5, similar to the previous findings, exhibit significant differences in attitudes towards subcategories of refugees: those with the same ethnicity as the general population vs. those with another ethnicity (Pair 1), from rich countries in Europe vs. poor countries in Europe (Pair 2), from rich countries outside Europe vs. poor countries outside Europe (Pair 3), from rich countries in Europe vs. rich countries outside Europe (Pair 4), and from poor countries in Europe vs. poor countries outside Europe (Pair 5). There is a significant difference in mean scores for all but one pair (Pair 3). Like the findings on immigrant groups, we find that refugees from either the same ethnicity (as opposed to another ethnicity), from rich countries (as opposed to poor countries), and from European countries (as opposed to non-European countries) are preferred to their counterparts. However, when looking at attitudes on refugees from countries outside Europe, people make no distinction from which type of country

(rich/poor) they originate. Nevertheless, these results provide further weight to the claim that people make a genuine distinction in which type of newcomer, in this case refugees, they prefer. This also allows us to further confirm *hypothesis 2, hypothesis 3*, and *hypothesis 4*, with the caveat that no distinction can be found in preferences towards refugees from rich non-European countries or poor non-European countries.

Table 5. Wilcoxon signed-rank test results for differences in attitudes between refugee groups

| | M | SD | M | SD | 95% CI mean difference | Z |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Refugees of same race | | Refugees of different race | | | |
| | 2.74 | .91 | 2.53 | .93 | .19 - .22 | -24.49*** |
| Pair 2 | Refugees of rich European countries | | Refugees of poor European countries | | | |
| | 2.58 | .94 | 2.56 | .94 | .01 - .04 | -2.62** |
| Pair 3 | Refugees of rich non-European countries | | Refugees of poor non-European countries | | | |
| | 2.49 | .95 | 2.48 | .96 | -.01 - .02 | -.02 |
| Pair 4 | Refugees of rich European countries | | Refugees of rich non-European countries | | | |
| | 2.58 | .94 | 2.49 | .95 | .08 - .11 | -15.07*** |
| Pair 5 | Refugees of poor European countries | | Refugees of poor non-European countries | | | |
| | 2.56 | .94 | 2.48 | .96 | .06 - .08 | -12.24*** |

Note. **p < .01; ***p < .001.

**Discussion**

Following the 2015 migration crisis, Europe is currently dealing with large numbers of newcomers. Tensions within and between European countries run high following several (violent) incidents and the perceived (supra-)national economic and cultural cost of allowing this group to settle in Europe (Goodman et al. 2015). As a response to the growing uncertainty surrounding newcomers' cultural integration and economic burden on society, media and politicians have begun to place them into categories such as 'migrant' and 'refugee'. The idea

behind these social constructs is to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate newcomers, and to demarcate "the population" from "the other" (Foucault et al. 2007; Lee and Nerghes 2018). Such categorisations cannot provide a realistic representation of these groups, as migration motives and movements are complex processes that cannot be reduced to a set of categories (Collyer 2010). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the widespread use of these categories has legal and social consequences on newcomers and on attitudes from the population towards these groups. Legally, newcomers that are given the label of 'refugee' are entitled to protection, rights and other resources, while 'migrants' are entitled to far less (Sajjad 2018).

***Diverging Attitudes Towards (Subcategories of) 'Immigrants' and 'Refugees'***

This study reveals that people make a genuine distinction between immigrants and refugees, as attitudes towards refugees are generally more positive than attitudes towards immigrants. This is likely related to differential framing of these groups with refugees portrayed as victims who are more deserving of the aid that Western Europe provides (Lawlor and Tolley 2017). Migrants are represented in a more negative light as their economic burden to society is often cited (Bradimore and Bauder 2011; Kempadoo 2005; Lee and Nerghes 2018). When we compare attitudes towards subcategories of immigrants and refugees, cleavages appear based on three characteristics: ethnicity, economic situation, and region of origin. Firstly, immigrants and refugees with the same ethnicity as most of the population are preferred to immigrants and refugees with a different ethnicity than most of the population. This can be framed within social identity theory as those with a similar ethnicity to the native population of a country may be perceived as less threatening than those with a different ethnicity, because they likely originate from countries with similar value systems to the four countries in this study – in other words, feelings of symbolic threat towards this group will be lower. Such assumptions are supported

by the fact that there has been an increase in xenophobia and racism across Europe in the past few years, mainly targeting those who 'look' different (Wieviorka 2018).

The economic dimension continues to be important as immigrants and refugees from rich countries in- and outside Europe are preferred to immigrants and refugees from poor countries in- and outside Europe. This may be related to the negative framing of these newcomers where concerns about the economic burden of the migration flow on the host country are articulated in media messages and by politicians. The economic burden of newcomers, particularly economic migrants, on a country is often cited to stimulate a sense of (il)legitimacy concerning a certain type of newcomers and serves as a major source of prejudice (Fetzer 2012; Lancee and Pardos-Prado 2013). The fact that attitudes towards immigrants and towards refugees diverge on this economic dimension supports the idea that framing influences the realistic (or economic) threat experienced by the in-group, even when controlling for socio-demographic characteristics and country differences.

A third cleavage can be identified along the lines of the region of origin. When we compare attitudes towards immigrants and refugees from rich European countries to attitudes towards immigrants and refugees from rich non-European countries, the population in the four countries under study is more positive towards newcomers from European countries. This pattern is the same for newcomers of poor countries: those from Europe are preferred to those from outside Europe. This could again be framed within social identity and group threat theory: those from European countries may be perceived as less threatening than those from outside Europe, since these newcomers are likely similar to the native population in terms of value orientations, beliefs, traditions, religious roots, language, and a shared history. In short, there is less social - and particularly cultural - distance.

When we look at the impact of the use of such categories on public opinion towards these groups, our findings and the literature suggest that framing has a vital impact (De Coninck

et al. 2018; Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017). Framing is a process that defines the way an issue is represented, identifies causes, makes moral judgements in some cases, and shapes proposed solutions (O'Neill et al. 2015). As a result, the way an issue is framed may undermine public support and steer public opinion. Migration is no exception to this, and studies have shown that migrants and refugees are negatively framed. We show that attitudes towards immigrants and refugees are determined by which type of news medium is consumed, but more importantly: the difference in attitudes is determined by this as well. The consumption of commercial television and tabloids, which are known for a more negative framing of refugees (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017), stimulates more positive attitudes towards immigrants rather than towards refugees. The results also point to country variation in attitude differences, as the Dutch and the French prefer refugees over immigrants. However, the underlying mechanism in each country is different. Whereas in the Netherlands, this gap appears to be driven primarily by more positive attitudes towards refugees, in France it is driven by more negative attitudes towards immigrants. Could this effect be the result of differential framing practices within each country?

While this study shows that the use of specific terminology affects public attitudes, we do not suggest that contextual or demographic factors play only a marginal role in the formation of public opinion preferences. When we consider the large effect sizes of educational and religious indicators on attitudes towards immigrants and refugees and attitude differences, it is clear that the terminology used in mass media and by politicians presents us with only a part of the picture on public attitudes, but one which is not often investigated.

### *Challenging Migrant Categorizations*

We conclude this article by considering the implications of our findings for policy, practice and academic scholarship. Our research contributes to a more in-depth understanding of the

impact of migrant categorisations on public opinion preferences by the population. It builds upon a body of academic literature that has demonstrated that categorizations of migrant groups are increasing, that news media utilize different frames for different groups, and that these frames impact public opinion preferences of the population (Apostolova 2017; De Coninck et al. 2018; Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017). An important question is how these results can be translated into ideas and concepts that enable policy-makers to shift their way of thinking and develop approaches to decrease this divergence in opinions between migrant groups. In their qualitative study on the disjunction between integration policies and refugees' experiences, Crawley and Skleparis (2018) emphasize several points that also apply to this study. First, it is important to stress that categories are pervasive and inevitable. Collyer and de Haas (2012, 468) state that "ignoring or rejecting them does not mean they go away and may blind us to the important interrelationship between scientific and political forms of knowledge production that have become inherent to the creation and maintenance of categories". It is important that we, as scholars, approach categories – particularly those used by politicians - from a critical perspective.

Second, and closely related to the first, it is dangerous to work with categories that were constructed by others in order to engage with policy-makers or the media. Although much of this article warns of the 'dangers' of labelling and the use of terminology in society, we cannot ignore the fact that alternate types of terminology were used in this paper as well. We use the term 'newcomers'[6] in lieu of 'immigrants' and 'refugees' at certain points in this article, but this may carry negative associations of its own. While 'newcomers' may not be associated with a specific type of threat or deservingness as of right now, it does presume that all people with

[6] Although the term 'newcomer' was used throughout this article, it was not mentioned in the survey. Respondents were not influenced by this in any way.

a migration background are ‘new’. However, at what point does one seize to be a newcomer? The implication of permanently being a ‘new’ arrival in the host society may also prove to be problematic for optimal integration in a multicultural society. Additional labels which were used in this study (e.g. same race, different race, rich or poor countries) must also be interpreted with caution, as people may differ in their perception of what constitutes a ‘rich’ or ‘poor’ country in- or outside Europe. In that regard, we acknowledge that the use of certain categories in this study (e.g., ‘refugees from rich European countries’) are somewhat counterfactual, as there are very few refugees from rich European countries. To compare this ‘fictional’ group of refugees from rich countries to refugees from poor countries – which respondents can more easily visualize – may challenge the external validity of some of these concepts. This is in contrast with other frames of comparison (e.g., preferences towards refugees of the same race vs. refugees of a different race to the majority population) which respondents can more easily relate to and are used in framing practices on a daily basis.

Third, and perhaps the most important point in the context of this study, is that we need to avoid falling into the trap to suggest that someone who belongs in one category or the other is somehow more ‘deserving’ than another. Our results clearly show that people make attitude distinctions based on these categories in terms of who is allowed to settle in their country, and sub-categorical distinctions based on ethnicity, economic situation, and region of origin strengthen our belief that these categorizations do not randomly affect public opinion, but that there is a specific pattern of prejudice which moves along particular characteristics of groups. It is understandable that some are hesitant to ‘open up’ the category of refugees to include a broader range of newcomers since this may place additional strain on an already struggling system of welfare benefits in many Western European countries. Instead “we should be challenging where the boundaries between categories are placed and the differential value – and rights – assigned to those who are situated accordingly” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 60).

In reaction to the use of categories like ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’, migration scholars encourage others to move beyond this dichotomy since these categories do not accurately reflect the way migratory processes work. People with different kinds of motivations travel together, and individuals may change categories or belong to more than one category at the same time. In a reaction to this call for more nuance, we have seen the emergence of what Apostolova (2017) calls categorical fetishism: the development of an increasing number of categories to describe newcomers (e.g., ‘transmigrants’, ‘climate refugees’, …). Nevertheless, these additional categories are insufficient in providing a realistic picture of migration motivations and experiences (Collyer 2010; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). It is also important to be aware of the contribution of scholarly work to the continued use of these categories, as Crawley and Skleparis (2018, 50) state that “taking the dominant categories as the basis of our analytical approach can limit our understanding of migration and make us potentially complicit in a political process which has, over recent years, stigmatised, vilified and undermined the rights of refugees and migrants in Europe”.

Despite the innovative nature of this study – as a large-scale quantitative comparison of attitudes towards immigrants and refugees has not yet been conducted –, there are some limitations. Although we depart from a large sample of European adults (N = 6,000), we cannot claim that these results are representative of Europeans. The countries under study (Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden) are similar in terms of value orientations and welfare systems. Including data from Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, and the UK would provide us with a more comprehensive perspective on how attitudes in Europe diverge between categories of newcomers. A second limitation is found in the formulation of the items on migrant categories. Although the framing of migrants in media and public discourse is often subtle and implicit, the formulation of our categories (e.g., immigrants from rich countries outside Europe) is much more explicit. This may have skewed attitudes to favour those newcomers

who are more ‘similar to’ the in-group. Immigration experiences (including perceptions of immigrants by non-immigrants) are incredibly complex phenomena, and we call upon other researchers to use mixed methods approaches that link quantitative and qualitative work on this subject, particularly when considering distinctions in perceptions between newcomer groups. Although several qualitative studies have been carried out in this regard, and large-scale quantitative insights are provided in this study, it remains clear that the mechanisms by which people make distinctions between and within newcomer groups are complex: perception cleavages exist between immigrants and refugees, but also towards subcategories of these groups based on ethnicity, economic situation, and region of origin. We also ask for more in-depth content analyses into this field, as the differential framing of each (sub)group may also be reflected in people’s attitudes. While there is a large body of literature on the framing of newcomers in general (e.g. Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017), and some studies which compare the framing of migrants and refugees (Lawlor and Tolley 2017), much less is known about the differential framing of subcategories of newcomers based on ethnicity, economic situation, and region of origin. It is important to investigate this in more detail as it potentially contributes to country differences in public attitudes in Europe (see attitude differences between Dutch and French citizens in this study). In conclusion, we believe that this study provides valuable insights into several new avenues of research that may shed further light on the complex relationship between migrant categorizations and public opinion preferences of the general population.

**Disclosure of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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