



## 9. First Impressions or Adjusting Prejudices

### The Initial Response to Newcomers and the Role of Education

**Karijn Nijhoff**

A conversation during the initial, exploratory phase of a study into the experiences of Syrian refugees on the labour market took a surprising turn: the discussion partner reported complaints about soiling of toilets and indicated that the probable cause was Dutch toilets being used as squatting toilets. In many parts of the world, it is a widespread practice to squat over a toilet, with countries like Japan displaying stickers in toilets as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Warning sticker with instructions against squatting

Toilet etiquette varies in various parts of the world, and this is an example of how cultures can come to clash over a very basic need. *Geen Stijl* – a news site describing itself as ‘tendentious, spurious and unnecessarily rude’ – has already seized this as an opportunity to state ‘we’ should not adapt to ‘others’. It is argued that migrants should adopt the German (and Dutch) custom, while mocking bathroom etiquette in Syria. Interestingly in this regard is that numerous studies suggest that squatting is better for your bowel health (e.g. Enders, 2014).

The saying ‘What the eye doesn’t see, the heart doesn’t grieve over’ is a way of saying we only love what we know. And there are many more ways in the vernacular to express the same, referencing to strangers and to a fear of the unknown. In the social sciences,

When citing in APA, please refer as follows:

Nijhoff, K. (2018). First impressions or adjusting prejudices: The initial response of newcomers and the role of education. In F. Jacobs, & E. Sjoer (Eds.), *Inspired to change: A kaleidoscope of transitions in higher education*. The Hague, The Netherlands: The Hague University of Applied Sciences.

especially in social psychology and sociology, fear of the unknown and the tendency to favour the group one belongs to are recognised phenomena. This chapter will look at elements of these scientific theories and establish a link between these elements and the initial findings of a study of Syrian refugees on the Dutch labour market. First, this study is described, after which a glimpse into the world of social psychology<sup>1</sup> is provided. This chapter concludes by taking a wide perspective on Dutch society and by discussing some lessons that can be learned for a diverse future.

### **Study of Syrian employees in the Dutch labour market**

Early 2017 a study was launched into experiences of the Dutch labour market with Syrian nationals holding refugee status, or Syrian permit holders<sup>2</sup>. In the period from 2014 to 2016, approximately 40,000 people came to the Netherlands as refugees fleeing the violence in Syria. This comparatively large inflow over a brief time meant that several initiatives were developed to promote the integration of permit holders in the labour market. The study looks at the experiences of permit holders, their colleagues and managers. It aims to build a website, employers can use to provide guidance to Syrian permit holders and employ them in a sustainable manner in the workplace. The study approaches a range of public and privately held businesses of varying sizes, with in-depth interviews being conducted with the various stakeholders (De Jong, Nijhoff, Sjoer, De Vries, and Wilbrink, forthcoming).

Interviews were held with organisations and companies employing permit holders. In some cases, these may not be representative of an average Dutch business, as permit holders generally encountered difficulties finding employment. Statistics show that individuals of refugee background often have to search for an extensive period of time for employment. They also reveal that unemployment is high amongst these groups, at around 60% on average (Baycan-Levent & Nijkamp, 2009; Betts, Sterck, Geervliet, & MacPherson, 2017; Foti & Fromm, 2016).

There are several reasons why the integration of refugees and permit holders on the labour market is not easy. One of those is the 'unknown means unloved' principle, as referred to above. Not only are 'alien' or 'different' things ridiculed or cast in a negative light, 'the other' is also treated differently. These processes have been described extensively in social psychology<sup>3</sup>, providing insight into the difficulties and solutions in a diverse society. The sections that follow discuss a number of these processes.

1 This will be limited to an impression, to the beginnings of what has been written on bias, stereotypes and ethnocentrism in social psychology.

2 Individuals holding refugee status have been recognized by the State of the Netherlands as a refugee and will be permitted to remain in the Netherlands for a period of at least five years. They have been granted a (5 year) residence permit and are allowed to work. In this article they will be referred to as 'permit holders'.

3 Sociology is among the fields that have extensively studied processes between groups and between newcomers and established members, e.g. in the work of Robert Merton and Norbert Elias.

## **Social psychology of group processes<sup>4</sup>**

After the Second World War, a range of experiments were conducted to study group behaviour. The Holocaust was a crucial factor leading to this research: how was it possible that large parts of society allowed themselves to become involved in genocide of 'the other'? Could group processes provide an explanation for this? Sherif & Sherif (1953) were among the first researchers to systematically investigate group processes and relationships between groups. They studied the behaviour of boys in summer camps, dividing them into groups and then having them compete against each other. Even slight competition gave rise to prejudice, discrimination and ethnocentrism, particularly in the group emerging as winners in the experimental competition. The authors developed the 'Realistic Conflict Theory' to account for this: prejudice, discrimination, and ethnocentrism will arise quickly when groups are competing for the same goals (not just when winning a game, but equally when competing for jobs, houses, etc.).

The Realistic Conflict Theory is formulated around the aims of the groups, whereas other research indicates that it is not necessarily competitive relations that prompt prejudice, discrimination and ethnocentrism. The Minimal Group Paradigm describes how individuals tend to favour their own group, even if their group is based on completely arbitrary distinctions. Simply being assigned to a particular group leads members to view their group in a more positive light: group membership by itself can give rise to ethnocentrism and competition.

The 'Minimal Group Paradigm' prompted further research into group behaviour and people's motivations for forming such strong attachments to groups. This led to the development of the 'Social Identity Theory', which states that individuals determine part of their identity based on membership of a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Membership of one or more groups gives individuals a sense of pride and identity as well as self-confidence – think of sports clubs or national teams for an apt illustration of this. A club or team win can raise people's opinion of themselves.

In other words, as soon as a group is established, its members will try to maintain the highest possible status. This is already evident when groups are based on very rudimentary distinctions such as 'you are the red team' and 'you are the blue team'. As the group characteristics or groups gain in importance, this group identification becomes ever stronger. Customs that differ between other groups and one's own group soon become targets of ridicule, or at the very least are characterised as strange. The same applies to bathroom etiquette in a large part of the world.

---

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the sources previously referenced, this part of the text is mainly based on Hogg & Vaughan (1995) and Duckitt (1992).

Membership of a group is a source of pride, a sense of identity and self-confidence to us, and it is therefore key that the group is viewed in a favourable light. The Social Identity Theory uses this principle to connect the effect of group membership and identity to a wide range of processes. Ethnocentrism, bias and discrimination are examples cited previously. Other processes are favouring one's own group, reinforcing differences between groups, falling in with the customs in one's own group, judging the behaviour of one's own group and that of the other group. This set of processes fits in with the tendency to perceive alternative behaviours of others negatively and view one's own customs positively. These processes also provide a basis for discrimination.

### **Ethnocentrism**

A definition of ethnocentrism existed as early as 1906: "An interrelated set of values, attitudes, and behaviours involving both ingroup identification and outgroup hostility" (Duckitt, 1992, p. 67). It touches on these group aspects and goes some way to explain aversion to strangers. Social categorisation is key in this context, as humans have a limited capacity for storing new information. This means that new information is commonly selected based on recognisability: a woman wearing a headscarf will be more readily recognised as Muslim than a woman who has not covered her head. In this way, others are continually picked out for their differences, while similarities are overlooked (because they aren't as visible). The same is true for behaviour. If a member of another group makes a mistake, this is remembered better and attributed quicker to that particular group ('they are just prone to making errors'), compared with an error committed by a member of one's own group. Combined with the Social Identity Theory, it quickly becomes clear that in the eyes of many, everything 'others' do is wrong and everything done in accordance with the values and standards held by the individual or group itself, is regarded as good or better.

### **Diversity and community**

Group processes, ethnocentrism, discrimination and prejudice are closely intertwined in our thinking, but this does not mean change is impossible. There are many ways in which thinking can be influenced. One of these is described in the 'Contact Hypothesis', which posits that contact or interaction with members of a different group can do away with prejudices. Although this does not hold true in every scenario, the 'Holidays for all' documentary illustrates this well<sup>5</sup>. The topic of this documentary is a camping site in Zeeland, part of which has been set aside as a temporary reception centre for asylum seekers. A (white, Dutch) couple is seen walking across a part of the camping site that is used to accommodate asylum seekers. The couple opposes the reception centre, feels that permit holders are 'opportunists' and sees no reason why refuge cannot

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.npo.nl/vakantie-voor-iedereen/29-08-2017/POW\\_03597982](https://www.npo.nl/vakantie-voor-iedereen/29-08-2017/POW_03597982): 28th-29th minute

be provided in Syria or their own country. They then strike up a conversation with a married couple from Iran, and at the end of the conversation they come away with an adjusted view. They have discovered similarities between themselves and the others. The refugees are Christians and well dressed. Their brief interaction has created some scope for understanding and made the contrasts between the groups less marked. Suddenly, membership of other groups gains relevance. The scenario changes from Dutch nationals on one side and refugees on the other to 'the well-dressed group' and 'the Christian group' – things they have in common.

Perceptions can also be altered because of changes in the context. Social settings are not fixed. Societies are constantly changing and social comparisons change along with this (Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty, & Hayes, 1992; Haslam & Turner, 1992). 'This is how we do things' or 'this has always been the way' are concepts that often lack any basis: half a century ago or even 25 years ago, things were done differently and society has changed a great deal. People tend to forget that communities and cultures are not immutable things, and that as a result identities and group identities can be fluid.

Contact, however, is not the only solution. It is also important to explore and take on board other ideas and refrain from responding with 'this is how we do things'<sup>6</sup>. Wherever distinct groups interact – in workplaces, clubs or schools – it is important that differences not only be allowed to exist but also be given leeway. The concept of 'interactional diversity' expresses that interaction is needed in addition to contact (Garcia, 2014).

One aspect of interaction is that existing differences not need to be the focal point. After all, humans are not one-dimensional creatures. A refugee could also be a mother, daughter, academic or a dentist. A migrant could be Muslim, a fan of classical music, a son, a student or a car lover. Aside from the differences, there could also be many similarities that are currently being overlooked. Striking examples can be found of this, such as a Danish clip on 'pigeonhole thinking'<sup>7</sup>: The clip illustrates how people fit into many 'pigeonholes' at the same time and how, if we look beyond differences in appearance, there are many ways in which we find a lot of similarities between people. Another example is a wonderful TedX talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in which she addresses the danger of a single story.<sup>8</sup>

Change is possible and (higher) education has a vital role to play in this. Research and education can support society in highlighting the importance of diversity and in training people to recognise the added value of diversity. Everyone will need to put considerable effort into ensuring people are judged for their personal qualities. Lecturers and professionals will need to examine their own judgements and biases

6 <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/08/09/hoera-we-zijn-divers-maar-wat-nu-12427898-a1569316>

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEvlsm569GE>

8 [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)

first, before they can help to shape the perceptions of students. There is no reason why 'pigeonhole thinking' and 'single stories' should continue to exist. The education sector is well placed to tackle thinking as 'this is how we do things' – sure, this is how we do things, but are there other ways? And if so, what do these involve? Together with students, lecturers can promote the benefits of the contact hypothesis and the concept of interactional diversity. Textbox 1 gives examples of programs and tools to use for this goal in education. In this way, social awareness of a different but healthier practice may, in a few years' time, have us all squatting on our toilets.

*The website of the University of Michigan offers access to an array of tools for instructors to enhance diversity (<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/cultivating-inclusive-classrooms/>)*

*Another example is the 'Social Identity Wheel' (<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/2017/08/16/social-identity-wheel/>). This provides for an activity that encourages students to reflect on the numerous ways they identify socially, how these identities become visible or more keenly felt at various times, and how those identities impact the ways others perceive or treat them. The worksheet prompts students to fill in various social identities (such as race, gender, sex, ability disability, sexual orientation, etc.) and further categorise those identities based on which matter most in their self-perception and which matter most in others' perception of them. The Social Identity Wheel can be used in conjunction with a 'Personal Identity Wheel' to encourage students to reflect on the relationships and dissonances between their personal and social identities. The wheels can be used as a prompt for small or large group discussion or reflective writing on identity by using the 'Spectrum Activity Questions on Identity'.*

*Michigan State University offers similar programs, including tools for instructors to detect implicit biases (<http://inclusion.msu.edu/education/diversity-and-inclusion-workshops.html>).*

*Textbox 1: Examples of inclusion and diversity programs/tools*

## References

- Baycan-Levent, T. & Nijkamp, P. (2009). Characteristics of migrant entrepreneurship in Europe. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 21(4), 375-397.
- Betts, A., Sterck, O., Geervliet, R. & MacPherson, C. (2017). *Talent displaced. The economic life of Syrian refugees in Europe*. Oxford: Deloitte/Oxford University RSC
- Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (28 September 2016). *Syrische immigranten wonen verspreid over Nederland*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2016/39/syrische-immigranten-wonen-verspreid-over-nederland>
- De Jong, Nijhoff, Sjoer, de Vries, & Wilbrink (forthcoming). *Syrische vluchtelingen aan het werk: Leren van pilotprojecten*. Study commissioned by the Equity Fund Instituut GAK.
- Duckitt, J. (1992). *The Social Psychology of Prejudice*. New York: Praeger
- Enders, G. (2014). *De mooie voedselmachine. De charme van je darmen*. Amsterdam: Luitingh-Sijthoff
- Foti, K. & Fromm, A. (2016). *Approaches to the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union
- Garcia, Jessica (2014). Pedagogies that Leverage the Potential of Diversity in the Classroom. Presentation at the Professional and Organizational Development Network, Annual Conference, Dallas TX.
- Haslam, S.A., Turner, J.C., Oakes, P.J., McGarty, C., & Hayes, B.K. (1992). Context-dependent variation in social stereotyping 1: The effects of intergroup relations as intermediated by social change and frame of reference. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 22, 3-20.
- Haslam, S.A. & Turner, J.C. (1992). Context-dependent variation in social stereotyping 2: The relationship between frame of reference, self-categorization and accentuation. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 22, 251-277.
- Hogg, M.A. & Vaughan, G.M. (1995). *Social Psychology. An introduction*. London: Prentice Hall
- De Jong, Nijhoff, Sjoer, De Vries, & Wilbrink (forthcoming) *Syrische vluchtelingen aan het werk. Leren van pilotprojecten*. Study commissioned by the Equity Fund Instituut GAK.
- Sherif, M. & Sherif, C.W. (1953). *Groups in Harmony and Tension. An integration of Studies on Intergroup Relations*. New York: Harper & Brothers
- Tajfel, H. & Turner, J.C. (1986). The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour. In: Austin, W.G. & Worchel, S. (eds.) *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. (7-24) Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publ.