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The Effect of Cultural and Religious Factors Regarding Immigrants and Locals on the Integration Process

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Abstract

As immigration and the cases of asylum requests escalated worldwide, the issue of integration of immigrants and asylum seekers in the receiving societies especially in European countries, received more attention. Cultural and religious factors are among the most important factors that influence the integration process. This essay tries to shed some light on the effect of cultural and religious factors

regarding immigrants and locals on the integration process by investigating the opinion of German locals and natives on the matter of the migration wave in 2015, through a field study and with the help of Human capital theory and Group threat theory. The results of this study show that the social visibility of Islam challenges integration yet merely having Islamic beliefs is a recognized right in Germany.

Keywords: Germany, Immigration, Integration, Culture, Religion, Islam

Introduction

In 2015 in the aftermath of the conflicts in Middle East, European countries experienced an influx of refugees from countries like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, which are recognized as countries that are mostly inhabited by a Muslim population. Furthermore, these countries are culturally remote from European countries like Germany that receive considerable share of these refugees (Fuchs *et al.*, 2021, p. 59)^[8]. According to Ostrand Germany is one of the countries that received the largest number of Syrian refugees among the countries outside of the middle east region (Ostrand, 2015, p. 258)^[12]. Despite the fact that Germany, like many other European societies is broadly secular, Christian religion has an important institutional social and political role in that society, which is the result of a established relation between church and state (Statham, 2016, pp. 217-219)^[14]. When one intends to investigate the matter of migrant integration chances in the light of differences between the dominant religion in the receiving society and the perceived religion of the migrant population, it should be noted that the degree of adaptation of migrants or their resistance as they encounter the dominant culture of the receiving society is very much influenced by migrants' dominant religion (Statham, 2016, p. 218)^[14], which in the case of migration wave of 2015 is Islam. On the other hand, anti-Muslim sentiments is one of the most important challenges that the Integration of Muslim migrants in dominantly Christian countries is facing (Bansak *et al.*, 2016, p. 218)^[2]. Therefore, many researchers like Foner and Alba firmly state that Islam in a European context, where norms, values, and even national identity is strongly connected to Christianity, is a barrier to integration (Foner & Alba, 2008, p. 374)^[7]. To be specific, it is the visibility of Islam and the practice of public duties of Muslims to their religion that make the integration of Muslim refugees in the public life of western societies difficult (Statham, 2016, p. 219)^[14]. Since religious liberty is a recognized and respected right in Germany and almost all European societies, one can assume that belief in Islam per se should not pose a challenge to the integration of Muslim migrants and refugees in these societies. Therefore, one should investigate the factors that are associated with Islam, which make Muslims stand out and not fully integrated. It should be noted that it is the categorization of people in a society as 'us' and 'others' that challenges the integration process after the arrival of new immigrants in society. This categorization is based on differences in certain qualities and factors, based on which the immigrants and locals are distinguishable. Among these qualities, one can point out cultural and religious factors (West, 2014)^[15]. In other words one should investigate the cultural and religious factors, which are associated with Islam, that make middle eastern diaspora reflect as 'others' in the eyes of the local and native population in the European receiving societies. Hence, this essay aims to answer the following question:

How cultural and religious factors, regarding immigrants on one hand and the locals, on the other hand, can affect the integration process? (With a special Concentration on the viewpoint of Germans on the immigration wave of 2015)

This essay aims at identifying the cultural and religious factors that play a role in integration in German society by investigating the viewpoint of the locals and natives in German society.

Methodology

This is a sociological study aiming at clarifying those cultural and religious factors that from the perspective of German natives and locals have an effect on integration in German society after the arrival of immigrants and explaining, how these factors actually affect the integration process. This study is conducted using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method in this study includes online expert interviews and qualitative analysis of the interviews and the quantitative method includes random distribution of questionnaires among German locals and natives and then a statistical analysis of their answers.

This research is a field study. First, the researcher conducted a literature review. The results of the literature review were used to formulate interview questions. Out of 120 people, who were sent emails and asked to participate in the interview, 12 people including university professors, social workers specialized in the affairs of immigrants, and employees of refugee aid foundations agreed to participate in the interviews that were conducted online given the Corona pandemic restrictions at the time. The interviews were then transcribed and later put to analysis using the QCA method, which is elaborated in detail by Margrit Schreier in her book titled 'Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice'. After that, a questionnaire was formulated for this study in light of the results of the literature review and the qualitative part of the study. The questionnaires were randomly distributed and 107 participants answered the question on printed papers or by scanning a QR code on their smartphones. Their answers were then analyzed statistically through SPSS. The analysis and interpretation of the results of these qualitative and quantitative studies are presented in this paper.

This paper focuses on integration after the arrival of immigrants in the receiving society. Based on the definition presented on the website of the German federal ministry of the interior and community integration means that someone feels to be a part of the community. It means developing a common understanding among different residents of the society about how to live in that society together (Bundesministerium des Inneren und für Heimat, 2020) [4]. Also, according to Dr. Dieter Filsinger, integration is having equal rights to and a fair share of economic, ecological, social, and cultural resources of the society (Filsinger, 2008, p. 9) [6].

In the migration wave of 2015, the immigrants were mainly Muslims from the Middle East and Africa, who got themselves to Europe on foot or in small unsafe boats and large numbers (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2016) [3]. The receiving countries like Germany and other European countries that were subject to this immigration wave, were not ready for such a phenomenon. To elaborate better, it should be added that from 2003 to 2013, there were approximately 34,000 asylum seekers in Germany. This number increased fivefold in 2014 and experienced a further increase in 2015 (Herbert & Schönhagen, 2020) [10]. Despite

Welcoming culture¹ in the beginning in Germany, many Germans started to feel worried about this large number of foreign populations, who in general have almost no clue about European and German norms and values. This is partly reflected in a report by the Federal Criminal Police Office² about the occurrence of over 1000 assaults against refugees in 2015. This anxiety against immigrants can also be reflected in the intensified right-wing tendencies that gave more power to right-wing parties like AfD³ in Germany, which is renowned for its anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim tendencies (Große, 2019) [9].

Literature review

Alba and Nee asserted in their book '*Remarkings the American Mainstream*' that integration is a two-way process. They say that it is not just the task of one particular group of people in society to adapt with other groups, rather all the minority groups of the society together with the majority group should strive for integration in cooperation with each other (Alba & Nee, 2009) [1].

Klarenbeek in his essay '*Reconceptualising ,Integration as a two-way process*' expresses the opinion that assimilation is fundamentally a matter of inequality and should not be viewed as a one-way process, otherwise, it creates the idea that refugees and immigrants are undesirable. In this essay, integration is viewed as an end state, in which there are no social boundaries between the legitimate members of society (ingroup) and illegitimate members (outgroups). The realization of integration does not only depend on the commitment and efforts of different immigrant groups and their children, but also depends on the readiness, willingness, and structure of the receiving society. He elaborates on how people are divided into 'the Us' and 'the Others' and how they are treated accordingly. He explains that in the context of European integration (on social levels) the key concept is 'foreignness'. This concept is addressed through indicators such as ethnicity, gender, class, religion, etc. (Klarenbeek, 2021) [11].

Ebner and Helbling in their essay 'Social distance and wage inequalities for immigrants in Switzerland' examine the effect of social alienation between Swiss locals and immigrants on their income. Social alienation is high when immigrants have a different culture and education system and speak different languages. In this essay, the researchers answer the question that to what extent social and cultural factors that differ among immigrants from the Swiss affect economic integration. The level of social alienation is determined by examining culture, language, and the education system. The results of this research showed that immigrants from Germany or Austria have a high social similarity to the Swiss, and are well-integrated into the Swiss labor market. In contrast, immigrants that have significant differences from the Swiss have more challenges and obstacles in the Swiss labor market. This essay asserts that the education system is a very important element in the economic integration of immigrants. Besides, there is a direct relationship between the immigrants' length of stay in Switzerland and their income (Ebner & Helbling, 2016) [5].

The essay at hand is different works mentioned above in this regard that the scope of the research here is the study of the

¹ Willkommenskultur

² Bundeskriminalamt (BKA)

³ Alternativ für Deutschland (an alternative for Germany)

effect of cultural and religious factors on integration in Germany. For this reason, this essay utilizes the outcome of the above-mentioned essays that are conducted in different European countries and the US, and address the different aspects of the matter of integration in Germany.

Hypothesis

The correctness of the following statement is put to study in the light of the above-mentioned theories and based on an analysis of the collected data:

The cultural and religious differences between the immigrants of 2015 and the natives and locals in Germany, including the social visibility of Islam and having Islamic beliefs, cause challenges and problems to the integration process.

Theoretical framework

Integration, a two-way process

Based on this theory, in a society that recently received new immigrants, immigrants and locals should participate in the integration process, in the sense that not only immigrants and refugees (the 'Others') who enter the receiving society must adapt themselves to the new society and its conditions, but the native population (the 'Us') must also adapt to the new conditions caused by the arrival of an alien foreign population to the society. The more the members of these two groups are willing to undertake these adaptations, the more likely a successful integration in society (Klarenbeek, 2021) ^[11]. Integration is a matter of social standing and not just a legal or socio-economic matter alone. Legitimate people in the society (i.e. locals or natives) have a higher social standing, which gives them better access to different forms of economic, social, political, and cultural capital and also puts them in a position to deny such capital forms from illegitimate people in the society (Klarenbeek, 2021) ^[11]. In a European context when someone due to indicators such as ethnicity, gender, social class, and religion is considered to be too foreign, then this person faces challenges and problems regarding integration in that society. So, a given group of foreigners can deviate more from the mainstream majority of society compared to another group of foreigners, hence having more challenges in integrating with society (Klarenbeek, 2021) ^[11].

Human capital theory

The key concept in human capital theory is 'social distance', which is perceived as a group trait, that is assumed to be high when a group of immigrants, who originate from a particular country or region, come from a very different culture, a different educational system, and a different language compared to the receiving society (Ebner & Helbling, 2016) ^[5]. Even when the effect of education is not considered, there is still one prominent difference between immigrants and locals, which can be explained through the ethnic penalty, which is about the differences that cannot be explained through normal demographic variables and variables regarding human capital like age, level of education, and gender. It is the outcome of discrimination (Ebner & Helbling, 2016) ^[5]. When the social distance is high between an immigrant group and the locals in a society, the members of the immigrant group are particularly disadvantaged (Ebner & Helbling, 2016) ^[5]. Based on this theory, education is a form of individual investment (Becker

1964, and Mincer 1974 cited in Ebner & Helbling, 2016) ^[5]. Human capital can be earned in the educational system and the workplace. The high social distance between immigrants and locals leads to a feeling of uncertainty, withdrawal, and anxiety between them. In contrast, when the social distance is little, they experience a sense of shared identity.

Group threat theory

This theory addresses the relationship between the size of a particular immigrant group (particular out-group) in a society and the anti-immigrant behavior of the native population and states that the larger the size of the out-group, the more the members of the in-group see them as a threat. In every society, there is competition over limited societal resources between different population groups. Hence, the out-group is perceived as a threat to the interests of the in-group. This trait fuels anti-immigrant tendencies especially among those members of the society, who have a lower socio-economic level (less educated and less paid). When social rivalry (in-group and out-group rivalry) is at stake, the matters at hand are not only about tangible subjects like housing and job-market but also intangible matters like religious matters and language differences. To be precise, the notion of perceived group threat is about an "anticipation of negative consequences" caused by the presence of another group (Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010) ^[13].

Research findings

According to the interviewees, even though all Muslims can be very close to each other in terms of their religious beliefs and the practice of Islam, those Muslims in German society who strongly deviate from the rest of the society due to their manners, appearance and dressing methods, are more easily recognized as outsiders in comparison to Muslims who show more alignment with the values and rules of German society in terms of appearances and behavior. The interviewees believe that the image of Islam in European countries is plagued by stereotypes. A statistical analysis of the answers given to the questionnaire (Fig 1) shows that about 54 percent of the respondents believe to different degrees that it is better for immigrants to adapt their way of dressing and their appearance, which is based on the religion and culture of their country of origin, to the norms and values in the German society for better integration.

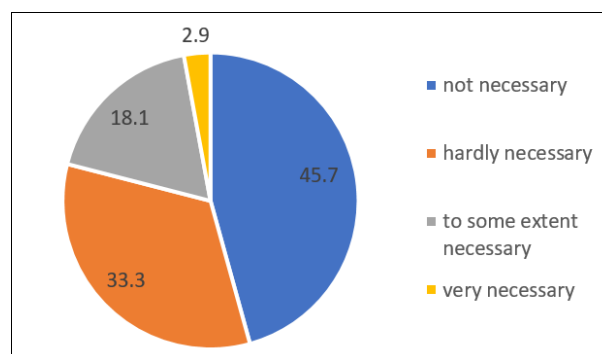


Fig 1: To what extent do you find it necessary that immigrants change their appearance and clothing for a better integration?

As an answer to the question, regarding Fig 2, the absolute majority of the respondents believe that encountering someone, whose clothing is in accordance with the Islamic

dress code, draws their attention to him/her. This means that his/her clothing, which is based on the religion and culture of their country of origin, is not considered normal, therefore harming integration. By comparing the answers given to these two questions, we realize that the more Islamic clothing is considered normal, the less the need to change the way these people dress in the eyes of Germans. The respondents were also asked to identify the most important factor that causes negative feelings toward immigrants and refugees (Fig 3). Only 5 percent of the respondents chose 'religion'. Hence, one can conclude, that it is not the belief in Islam that causes a feeling of dissatisfaction and discomfort in Germans as they encounter some of the immigrants, rather it is the demonstration of this belief and asserting this difference, or in other words, the social visibility of Islam, that in some cases causes negative sentiments among German locals and natives.

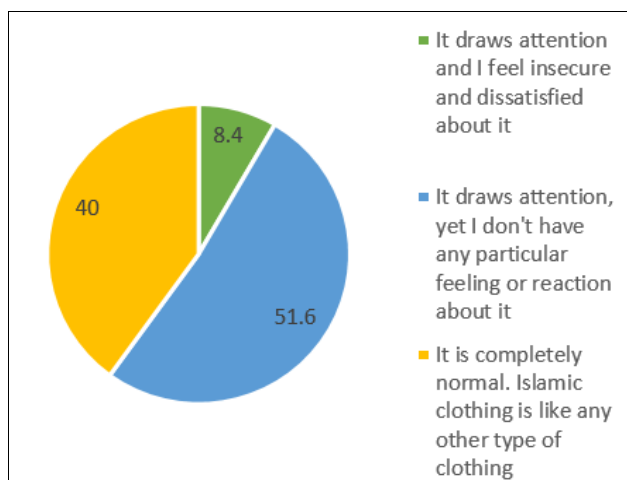


Fig 2: How would you feel or react as you encounter someone, whose clothing is in accordance to Islamic dress code?

The statistical analysis of the responses given to the question regarding Fig 3 shows that a total of 34 percent of the respondents have a negative feeling about immigrants and refugees most importantly because they have different values compared to German values (20 percent) and they fail to respect and abide by German social values and norms sufficiently (14 percent). These sorts of sentiments affect the integration process negatively. As one matches the responses to this question to the religious beliefs of every individual respondent, which was inquired in a separate question, one understands that among those who considered themselves without religious beliefs, second to 'other reasons', which were mostly about lack of sufficient knowledge about and understanding of immigrants and discrimination against them, 'having different norms and values' was the most frequent answer (15 percent). Among those, who identified as Christians, 'negligence towards German norms and values' (22 percent), and 'having different values than German values' (15 Percent) were the most frequent answers, both of which are caused by their attention to values and rules that are derived from their religion.

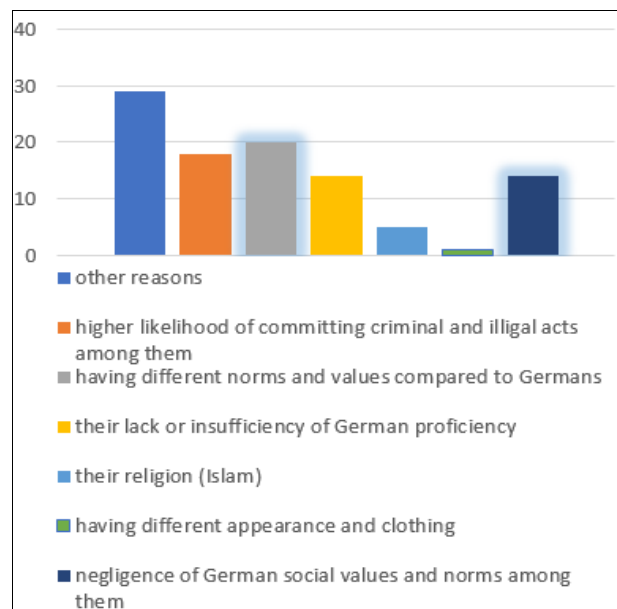


Fig 3: Why do you think that some Germans have a negative feeling towards immigrants and refugees?

Discussion

German society is a multicultural society. It means that the existence of different cultures in it is normal and accepted. It should be noted that the co-existence of different cultures in such a society depends on the compatibility of these cultures to the notion of 'standard German culture'. Many Germans are worried about the strengthening of the indication of foreign cultures in their society, which is intensified due to an increase in the number of immigrants and their noticeable cultural differences. They are worried that German culture undergoes some undesirable changes as it takes influence from foreign cultures. Behind the thought that considers cultural alterations as negative, lies a perception that considers German culture as a paragon, to which all should adapt. Dr. Thomas de Maizière, German federal minister of the interior in 2017, in an interview with Bild am Sonntag said that 'German standard culture' that includes rules and values, social structures, civil rights, and religion, is a binding notion. One important element of that is the superiority of the rule of law over religion. It should be noted that as long as different cultures don't have a serious deviation from this cultural benchmark, there is no problem, yet if a culture, in general, has a strong deviation from it, those who abide by that culture will have serious problems in German society, including problems regarding integration. According to the interviewees, the difference between Islam and Christianity not only as religions but also as two schools of thought regarding culture poses the most important and the hardest challenges to overcome in the integration process. As asserted by the interviewees, it also should be noted that religion and culture are two inseparable notions. Although Germany is mostly a Christian country, believing in other religions is considered completely normal. This is one of the rights that is recognized in the fourth article of the German Constitution. Therefore, following Islam in Germany is a personal decision, yet demonstrating

it publicly or social visibility of Islam through Islamic dress, hair and beard style, and wearing a hijab, especially radical forms of it, like the Burqa. In other words, appearing as a Muslim (by showing the stereotypical characteristics attributed to Islam, whose image has been tarnished in Europe) makes it difficult for immigrants to integrate into German society. Yet the mere personal belief in Islam per se is not problematic.

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