Can they ever be one of us? Perceived cultural malleability of refugees and policy support in host nations

Nur Soylu Yalcinkaya*, Nyla R. Branscombe, Fabian Gebauer, Claudia Niedlich, Nader H. Hakima

a The University of Kansas, United States
b The University of Bamberg, Germany
c The University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Handling editor: Elizabeth Page-Gould

Keywords:
Refugees
Essentialism
Malleability
Social identity
Intergroup helping

ABSTRACT

Public support for accepting refugees into Western countries may depend on their perceived cultural malleability—the possibility of cultural change and adaptation. We hypothesize that members of host nations will perceive child refugees as having greater potential for cultural malleability than adults, which, in turn, will positively predict their support for acceptance of refugees into their country. In Study 1, participants reported greater perceived cultural malleability in response to images of child Syrian refugees (compared to those of adults with explicit markers of ethnic/religious identity, or groups of refugees), which positively predicted policy support. This pattern was replicated using American (Study 2a) and German (Study 2b) samples, and even when adult refugees were depicted without explicit markers of identity in the images. We discuss the theoretical implications of our findings for research on essentialism and intergroup helping, and implications for fostering inclusive public opinion regarding immigration.

1. Introduction

The world is facing a major refugee crisis due to ongoing conflicts such as the civil war in Syria. Public opinion in Europe and the United States is divided; some consider accepting refugees into their country as a humanitarian duty, whereas others stand firmly against a possible influx of refugees. Media portrayals of refugees can guide public opinion in either direction. Images of children in the media have a particularly strong impact on the public, as in the case of Aylan Kurdi, a deceased toddler washed ashore after the sinking of a boat full of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, captured in a globally sensational image (e.g., Smith, 2015), among many others. Indeed, many campaigns focus on children to raise donations for refugees (e.g., “Save the Children”). However, the psychological process underlying the effects of exposure to images and stories of child refugees remains unknown. Furthermore, it is unclear whether such exposure makes a difference in terms of people’s responses to the refugee crisis (e.g., policy support). In this paper, we examine whether exposure to child images (compared to adults or groups of refugees) generates greater support for the acceptance of refugees into a Western host nation, due to the perceived potential for cultural change and adaptation associated with children.

Research on intergroup helping based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that people are less likely to help outgroup than ingroup members when the social identity that distinguishes them from the victims is salient (e.g., Levine & Manning, 2013; Levine & Thompson, 2004). Although majority members of host nations are likely to consider refugees as outgroup members, they may perceive differences among specific members of this outgroup. For instance, they may perceive some outgroup members as having greater potential to adapt to the host nation’s culture over time and become “one of us” compared to other members who may be more likely to remain cultural “others” in the long run, which may have implications for helping.

Such perceptions concerning refugees’ potential to adapt to the host society may be formed through exposure to representations of refugees (or immigrants) in the media, which influence public opinion especially during periods of intense levels of immigration (e.g., Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009). Whereas positive representations of immigrants can help counter perceptions of immigration as problematic (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009), negative representations of immigrants’ cultural values can evoke negative attitudes toward
immigrants among majority members of the host nation (Main, Essex, & Bell, 1994). In addition to the valence of representations, we propose that cues such as the age of refugees represented in the media may convey information about their cultural characteristics and shape people's general stance regarding immigration policies. Specifically, people may perceive child refugees from Syria (a Muslim- and Arab-majority nation) as having greater potential for cultural change and adaptation to a Western host nation than older adults. We argue that such perceived cultural malleability on the part of refugees can positively shape people's stance on policies regarding the acceptance of Syrian refugees into their country.

1.1. Essentialism and perceived cultural malleability

Lay beliefs about the fixed or malleable character of humans and their attributes (implicit theories, Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995) have implications for perception of groups (Hong, Levy, & Chiu, 2001; Levy, Plaks, Hong, Chiu, & Dweck, 2001). For instance, beliefs in fixed and rigid human attributes are associated with greater stereotyping (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998). Extending work on implicit theories, research on essentialism focuses on lay beliefs in underlying natures that constitute and differentiate social categories (e.g., Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000, 2002). Essentialism entails the tendency to understand social categories as expressions of discrete, fixed, natural, uniform, and defining characteristics that are shared by all members, and are informative about them (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Haslam et al., 2000, 2002). People may understand the essence of an ethnic or racial group in genetic/biological terms (e.g., Williams & Eberhardt, 2008) or in terms of cultural characteristics (e.g., Hong, Chao, & No, 2009; Morning, 2009). The latter understanding reflects cultural essentialism, or the belief that cultural patterns typical of an ethnic group fundamentally shape its members (Verkuyten, 2003). Based on cultural essentialism, different ethnic groups have distinct cultures, and the cultural boundaries between these groups are rigid and impermeable (Hong et al., 2009; Verkuyten, 2003). Extending previous research, which has identified fixedness, or lack of malleability, as an important dimension of essentialism (e.g., Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Bastian, Bain, & Kashima, 2006; Haslam et al., 2000), cultural essentialism also incorporates the belief that there is no room for the cultural characteristics of people (or groups) to change.

Attributing such essential cultural characteristics to ethnic groups plays an important role in attitudes toward immigrants and their integration into the society. For instance, if majority members of a host nation perceive an immigrant group as wanting to preserve their distinct culture, they may show less support for their integration into the society, especially if they are high in prejudice toward that group (Zagelka, Tip, González, Brown, & Cinnirella, 2012). In contrast, if the immigrant group signals that they wish to adopt the host culture, majority members tend to support their integration more (Zagelka et al., 2012). To the extent that majority members hold essentialist beliefs, they perceive cultural adaptation of immigrants as highly desirable, but at the same time, as not feasible (Zagelka, Nigbur, González, & Tip, 2013). This discrepancy in beliefs fosters high levels of prejudice against immigrants (Zagelka et al., 2013). When endorsed by dominant group members, cultural essentialism also relates to greater rejection of multiculturalist ideologies (Verkuyten & Brug, 2004), and greater support for anti-immigration policies (Verkuyten, 2003).

How do people come to attribute essential cultural characteristics to ethnic outgroups? Exposure to representations of individual members can shape perceptions of cultural characteristics of ethnic groups as a whole. Observers may use cues such as age of refugees in media representations to infer their potential for cultural malleability. For instance, people may consider adult members of an ethnic outgroup to have already been shaped definitively by a culture that is dissimilar to theirs, which has determined the kind of people they are. However, young children may not be considered full-blown members of an outgroup yet; thus, their cultural values and beliefs may change as they continue the process of socialization in a different cultural context (i.e., a host society). Inferences about cultural malleability as a function of age of represented members of a group, we argue, can influence support for policies concerning the whole group.

1.2. The present research

Integrating immigrants into the existing social order is a major challenge that host nations face (Verkuyten, 2004). Cultural essentialist beliefs may play a key role in the responses of majority members of host societies toward immigrants, as well as refugees. In our studies, we conceptualize cultural essentialist beliefs in terms of perceived potential for cultural change and adaptation attributed to an outgroup (i.e., refugees). We build on research showing that majority members may be more welcoming to refugees to the extent that they can foresee their cultural adaptation (Zagelka et al., 2012); we further propose that observers may perceive child refugees as having greater potential for cultural change and adaptation. Therefore, exposure to child refugees can challenge broader essentialist perceptions of refugees as a uniform group of cultural “others” with fixed characteristics. Specifically, we hypothesize that (H1) exposure to child (as opposed to adult or a group of) refugees will lead to higher perceived cultural malleability (i.e., expected cultural change and potential for cultural adaptation). We further propose a mediation hypothesis (H2), such that higher perceived cultural malleability will, in turn, positively predict support for acceptance of refugees into a host country.

A possible alternative mechanism for the proposed relationship between exposure to child refugees and policy support is through perceived threat. It is possible for observers to consider child (compared to adult) refugees as less threatening. Based on integrated threat theory, realistic threats comprise perceived economic, political, or physical threats to the well-being of the ingroup; symbolic threats comprise concerns about the morals, values, and beliefs of outgroups that challenge the worldview of the ingroup (e.g., Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Stephan, Renfro, Esses, and Martin (2005) have documented that a combination of realistic threats (e.g., that immigrants would take away jobs) and symbolic threats (e.g., that immigrants hold values that contradict core values of the host nation) can lead to negative attitudes toward immigrants. Perceived symbolic threats are associated with prejudice toward culturally different immigrants such as Muslims in Europe (González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008; McLaren, 2003). Furthermore, perceived threats to the dominant identity due to an expected increase in the percentage of immigrants in a society can foster intentions to engage in collective action against immigration (Shepherd, Fasoli, Pereira, & Branscombe, 2018). Exposure to child refugees may alleviate such threat-based responses to policies regarding refugees.

Another possible mechanism for the proposed relationship between exposure to child refugees and policy support is through emotions. Exposure to the suffering of young children may evoke strong emotions among observers. Collective emotions such as angst, anger, and fear relate to tendencies to take action against improving the living conditions of immigrants (Shepherd et al., 2018). Whereas negative emotions such as anger diminish support for assistance and rights for asylum seekers, positive emotions such as sympathy can foster support for such policies (Verkuyten, 2004). If exposure to child refugees evokes strong emotions such as empathy, this may play a positive role in policy support.

Based on the relevant literature, we included perceived threat and emotions in our hypothesized mediation model, to examine whether the mediating role of perceived cultural malleability in the relationship between exposure to representations of refugees and policy support remains significant even when these additional potential mediators are included. We present a test of our hypotheses across three experimental studies using American and German samples.
2. Study 1

In the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election, the United States witnessed heated debates on policies regarding immigration and refugees. Currently, refugees from Syria are not being accepted into the US. At the time of data collection (April 2016), such a policy was not in place; however, there were debates on acceptance of refugees within the discourse concerning security threats from Muslim-majority nations. In Study 1, we provide a test of our hypotheses with an American sample within this political climate.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

We recruited 114 American participants (65 males, 48 females, 1 missing, 71% White/Caucasian, 14% Asian, 7% Latino/Hispanic, 7% Black/African American, 2% mixed race and other, 1% missing, Mage = 35.15, SDage = 13.04) online through Mechanical Turk. The sample size is slightly smaller than the recommended 158 participants for a power of 0.80 to detect medium-sized effects (Cohen’s f = 0.25) in an ANCOVA based on an a priori power analysis.1

2.1.2. Procedure

All participants read a short paragraph about the Syrian refugee crisis. We manipulated age of refugees by randomly assigning participants to one of three conditions, where they viewed two images of young child refugees (child condition), or adult refugees (adult condition), or groups of adult and child refugees (mixed group condition), found through web searches.2

2.1.3. Measures

After the manipulation, participants responded to a set of statements using 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from (1) “Strongly Disagree” to (7) “Strongly Agree”, unless noted otherwise.3

2.1.3.1. Perceived cultural malleability. We used five items to measure perceived cultural malleability (e.g., “The refugees in the photos are likely to change in the future in terms of their cultural values”).4 Because these items do not belong to an existing measure, and since we used items that tap both expected cultural change and cultural adaptation, we conducted a factor analysis with maximum likelihood extraction and direct oblimin rotation to examine whether the items loaded on one or two factors. The solution yielded two factors with eigenvalues above 1, accounting for 56.7% of variance in the solution (Table 1). However, four of the items loaded substantially on both factors (loadings > 0.3). Because we theorized that the adaptation and change items would jointly assess the construct of perceived cultural malleability, we decided to use a composite of all five items (Cronbach’s α = 0.81).

2.1.3.2. Perceived threat. We used the item “How threatening do you think most Americans would consider the refugees in the photos?” to measure perceived threat posed by the refugees using a scale ranging from (1) “Not at all” to (7) “Very Much”.5

2.1.3.3. Emotional response. We used 5 items to measure emotions such as empathy in response to the images. We used a composite of all items as a measure of emotional response (Cronbach’s α = 0.92).

2.1.3.4. Support for acceptance of refugees. We used 4 items to measure support for policies targeting acceptance of refugees into the US (e.g., “The US should accept more Syrian refugee families”, Cronbach’s α = 0.92).

2.1.3.5. Attitudes toward Arabs, Muslims, and immigrants. We used 3 items to measure attitudes toward Arabs, Muslims, and immigrants (e.g., “How warmly or coldly do you feel towards Arabs?”, with responses ranging from (0) “Very Cold” to (100) “Very Warm”). We used a composite of all three items as a control variable, given that these attitudes are likely to relate to policy support regarding refugees from a Muslim- and Arab-majority country (Cronbach’s α = 0.90).

2.1.3.6. Political affiliation. We measured political affiliation as a control variable, given that it is likely to relate to opinions regarding immigration more broadly. The item read, “In terms of political orientation, I would consider myself:”, with response options ranging from (1) “Very Conservative” to (7) “Very Liberal”.

2.1.3.7. Demographic variables. Participants indicated their age, gender, and racial identity.

2.2. Results

Correlations between all dependent and control variables appear in Table 2.

2.2.1. Effects of the age manipulation

We conducted a Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) with the age manipulation (Child, Adult, Mixed Group) as the independent variable, emotional response, perceived threat, perceived cultural malleability, and support for acceptance of refugees as dependent variables, and political affiliation and attitudes toward Arabs, Muslims, and immigrants as covariates. Both political affiliation and attitudes had significant relationships with the dependent variables, Fs (4, 104) = 5.58 and 14.19, ps < .001, ηp²s = 0.17 and 0.35, respectively. The multivariate analysis showed a significant effect of the manipulation on the combination of the dependent variables, Wilks’ Λ = 0.65, F(8, 208) = 6.2, p < .001, ηp² = 0.19.5 Univariate follow-up analyses showed that, as hypothesized (H1), the manipulation had a significant effect on perceived cultural malleability, F(2, 107) = 3.45, p = .03, ηp² = 0.06. We conducted pairwise comparisons on the

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to be able to adapt to the way of life in a Western country.</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to be able to adapt to a Western culture.</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to change in the future in terms of their cultural values.</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to change in the future in terms of their worldviews.</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to change in the future in terms of their religious beliefs.</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 We used G*Power 3.1 to conduct all power analyses (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). Sample size was determined before any data analyses.
2 Stimuli used in all studies are available in the Supplementary Materials.
3 All relevant measures, manipulations, and exclusions are disclosed for this study and all following studies. Additional measures that did not relate to the present hypotheses were collected for exploratory purposes after the DV of interest reported in these studies. The data necessary to replicate the findings reported in these studies are made available and can be reached through the online article.
4 Items for the perceived cultural malleability, emotional response, and support for acceptance of refugees measures appear in the Supplementary Materials.
5 When we conducted a MANOVA without the covariates, the omnibus effect was significant, Wilks’ Λ = 0.62, F(14, 208) = 6.40, p < .001, ηp² = 0.21. The univariate effect was marginal on perceived cultural malleability, F(2, 109) = 2.36, p = .099, ηp² = 0.04, and significant on perceived threat, F(2, 109) = 25.56, p < .001, ηp² = 0.32.
experimental conditions using Bonferroni-adjusted significance values, and computed 95% confidence intervals for the mean differences (Mdiff). The analyses showed that participants considered child refugees (Mdiff = 4.39, SE = 0.18) as slightly more culturally malleable than adults (Mdiff = 3.89, SE = 0.18, p = .15, Mdiff = 0.51, 95% CI [−0.11, 1.13]), and as more malleable than mixed groups (Mdiff = 3.76, SE = 0.18, p = .04, Mdiff = 0.63, 95% CI [0.01, 1.24]). The manipulation also had a significant effect on perceived threat, (F(2, 107) = 26.46, p < .001, ηp² = 0.33). Participants believed that Americans would consider child refugees (Mdiff = 1.66, SE = 0.25) as less threatening than adults (Mdiff = 3.97, SE = 0.25, p < .001, Mdiff = −2.31, 95% CI [−3.19, −1.44]) or mixed groups (Mdiff = 3.83, SE = 0.18, p < .001, Mdiff = −2.18, 95% CI [−3.04, −1.31]). The main effect of the manipulation was not significant on emotional response (F(2, 107) = 0.35, p = .70, ηp² = 0.01) or support for acceptance of refugees (F(2, 107) = 0.38, p = .68, ηp² = 0.01).

2.2.2. Mediation models

To test our mediation hypothesis (H2), we used a mediation model with the age manipulation as the independent variable, perceived cultural malleability, perceived threat, and emotional response as parallel mediators, and support for acceptance of refugees as the dependent variable, with political affiliation and attitudes as covariates. As shown in Fig. 1, the analysis revealed an indirect effect of the dummy variable comparing the child and adult conditions on support for acceptance of refugees through perceived cultural malleability (b = −0.13, SE = 0.10, 95% CI [−0.44, −0.01]), as well as an indirect effect of the dummy variable comparing the child and mixed group conditions (b = −0.16, SE = 0.12, 95% CI [−0.53, −0.01]). Exposure to child images led to greater perceived cultural malleability than adult images (b = −0.51, SE = 0.25, t(107) = −1.99, p = .05, 95% CI [−1.01, −0.001]), or mixed groups (b = −0.63, SE = 0.25, t(107) = −2.48, p = .01, 95% CI [−1.13, −0.13]), which positively predicted support for acceptance of refugees into the US (b = 0.26, SE = 0.10, t(104) = 2.50, p = .01, 95% CI [0.05, 0.47]). However, the indirect effect of the manipulation on policy support through perceived threat was not significant for either dummy variable (bs = −0.16 and −0.15, SEs = 0.18 and 0.17, 95% CIs [−0.54, 0.17] and [−0.53, 0.15]). Likewise, the indirect effect through emotional response was not significant (bs = −0.05 and −0.04, SEs = 0.07, and 0.07, 95% CIs [−0.24, 0.06] and [−0.22, 0.07]).

2.3. Discussion

Our findings in Study 1 provided initial evidence for H1 and H2. Using a simple image manipulation, we showed that participants considered child refugees as more culturally malleable (and less threatening) than adults or groups. Moreover, only perceived potential for cultural malleability explained the relationship between exposure to refugee images and policy support.

One potential limitation of Study 1 is that the images we used in the adult condition included explicit markers of Arab or Muslim identity such as headscarves or traditional clothing, whereas images in the child condition did not involve such explicit markers. Observers may consider individuals who explicitly display their cultural identities as having lower potential for cultural change, or as more dissimilar and threatening. We addressed this potential confound in Study 2.

3. Study 2

The aim of Study 2a was to replicate findings from Study 1 and to rule out the possibility that presence of explicit markers of identity might underlie the differences between exposure to child and adult refugees observed in Study 1. In Study 2b, we tested whether our findings would apply to another Western country that is involved in the refugee crisis by using a German sample.

3.1. Study 2a

3.1.1. Method

3.1.1.1. Participants. We recruited 156 American participants (98 males, 58 females, 74% White/Caucasian, 9% Latino/Hispanic, 6% Asian, 5% mixed race and other, 4% Black/African American, 1% missing, Mage = 32.41, SDage = 13.04) online through Mechanical Turk in June 2016. The sample size is slightly smaller than the recommended 179 participants for a power of 0.80 to detect medium-sized effects (Cohen’s f = 0.25).

3.1.1.2. Procedure. The procedure was identical to Study 1; however, we added a fourth condition to our design: adults without identity cues. In this condition, we used images of adult refugees without any explicit markers of ethnic/religious identity. In each condition, we also provided the name and age of the refugee in each image: ages of the children were stated as 2 and 4, and ages of the adults as 38 and 52.

3.1.1.3. Measures. We used the same measures as in Study 1. However, we added one more item regarding expected cultural adaptation to our perceived cultural malleability measure ("The refugees in the photos are likely to be able to learn a Western language easily"). Because of the addition of this item, we conducted a factor analysis with maximum likelihood extraction and direct oblimin rotation on the six items to examine whether they loaded on the same factor. Only one factor with an eigenvalue above 1 was extracted, which accounted for 64.4% of the variance in the solution (Table 3). As in Study 1, we used a composite of all items as a measure of perceived cultural malleability (α = 0.89). We also measured emotional response (α = 0.89), support for acceptance of refugees (α = 0.93), attitudes toward Arabs, Muslims, and immigrants (α = 0.90), political affiliation, and demographic variables.

### Table 2

Correlations between all dependent and control variables in Study 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlate</th>
<th>Cultural malleability</th>
<th>Perceived threat</th>
<th>Emotional response</th>
<th>Support for acceptance</th>
<th>Political affiliation</th>
<th>Immigrant attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural malleability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived threat</td>
<td>−0.25**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional response</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>−0.16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for acceptance</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>−0.14</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political affiliation</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant attitudes</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>−0.10</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>0.65**</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

**p < .01.
Significant relationships with the dependent variables, $F(3, 148) = 10.04$ and $15.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.22$ and 0.30, respectively. The multivariate analysis showed a significant effect of the manipulation on the combination of the dependent variables, Wilks’ $\lambda = 0.65, F(12, 383) = 5.61, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.13$. Univariate follow-up analyses showed that, as hypothesized (H1), the manipulation had a significant effect on perceived cultural malleability, $F(3, 148) = 5.05, p = .002, \eta^2_p = 0.09$. Pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni-adjusted significance values showed that, as hypothesized (H1), participants considered child refugees ($M_{adj} = 4.67, SE = 0.18$) as more culturally malleable than adults ($M_{adj} = 3.76, SE = 0.19, p = .003, M_{adj} = 0.91, 95\% CI (0.22, 1.60)$) and adults without identity cues ($M_{adj} = 3.91, SE = 0.17, p = .01, M_{adj} = 0.76, 95\% CI (0.10, 1.42)$), and slightly more malleable than mixed groups ($M_{adj} = 4.03, SE = 0.18, p = .07, M_{adj} = 0.64, 95\% CI (−0.05, 1.30)$). The manipulation also had a significant effect on perceived threat, $F(3, 148) = 16.32, p < .01, \eta^2_p = 0.25$. Participants believed Americans would consider child refugees ($M_{adj} = 1.88, SE = 0.24$) as less threatening than adults ($M_{adj} = 3.93, SE = 0.25, p < .001, M_{adj} = −2.05, 95\% CI [−2.98, −1.12])$, adults without identity cues ($M_{adj} = 3.58, SE = 0.23, p < .001, M_{adj} = −1.69, 95\% CI [−2.59, −0.80]$), and mixed groups ($M_{adj} = 3.88, SE = 0.24, p < .001, M_{adj} = −1.99, 95\% CI [−2.90, −1.09]$). The main effect of the manipulation was not significant, $\eta^2_p = 0.13$. The univariate effects on perceived cultural malleability and perceived threat were significant, $F(3, 150) = 5.00$ and 16.93, $p = .002$ and $< .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.09$ and 0.25.

**Table 3**

Factor loadings for the factor analysis of items in the perceived cultural malleability measure in Study 2a.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to be able to adapt to the way of life in a Western country.</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to be able to adapt to a Western culture.</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to change in the future in terms of their cultural values.</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to change in the future in terms of their worldviews.</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to change in the future in terms of their religious beliefs.</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The refugees in the photos are likely to be able to learn a Western language easily.</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4**

Correlations between all dependent and control variables in Study 2a.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural malleability</th>
<th>Perceived threat</th>
<th>Emotional response</th>
<th>Support for acceptance</th>
<th>Political affiliation</th>
<th>Immigrant attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural malleability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived threat</td>
<td>$−0.17^{*}$</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional response</td>
<td>$0.40^{−}$</td>
<td>$−0.05$</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for Acceptance</td>
<td>$0.52^{−}$</td>
<td>$−0.20$</td>
<td>$0.44^{−}$</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political affiliation</td>
<td>$0.33^{−}$</td>
<td>$−0.06$</td>
<td>$0.22^{−}$</td>
<td>$0.57^{**}$</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant attitudes</td>
<td>$0.39^{−}$</td>
<td>$−0.18$</td>
<td>$0.46^{−}$</td>
<td>$0.60^{**}$</td>
<td>$0.41^{−}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

3.1.2. Results

Correlations between all dependent and control variables appear in Table 4.

3.1.2.1. Effects of the age manipulation. We conducted the same MANCOVA as in Study 1. Both political affiliation and attitudes had significant relationships with the dependent variables, $F(4, 145) = 10.04$ and 15.73, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.22$ and 0.30, respectively. The multivariate analysis showed a significant effect of the manipulation, $F(12, 383) = 5.67, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.13$. The univariate effects on perceived cultural malleability and perceived threat were significant, $F(3, 150) = 5.00$ and 16.93, $p = .002$ and $< .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.09$ and 0.25.

When we conducted a MANOVA without the covariates, the omnibus effect was significant, $F(12, 389) = 5.67, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.13$. The univariate effects on perceived cultural malleability and perceived threat were significant, $F(3, 150) = 5.00$ and 16.93, $p = .002$ and $< .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.09$ and 0.25.
significant on emotional response or support for acceptance of refugees, F(3, 148) ≤ 1.87, ps > .05.

3.1.2.2. Mediation models. We tested the same mediation model as in Study 1. As shown in Fig. 2, the results showed a significant indirect effect of the dummy variable comparing the child and adult conditions (b = −0.29, SE = 0.15, 95% CI [−0.64, −0.07]), the dummy variable comparing the child and adult without identity markers conditions, (b = −0.25, SE = 0.12, 95% CI [−0.55, −0.06]), and the dummy variable comparing the child and mixed group conditions (b = −0.21, SE = 0.13, 95% CI [−0.54, −0.02]) on support for acceptance of refugees through perceived cultural malleability. Exposure to child images led to greater perceived cultural malleability than exposure to adults (b = −0.91, SE = 0.26, t(148) = −3.55, p < .001, 95% CI [−1.42, −0.40]), adults without identity cues (b = −0.76, SE = 0.25, t(148) = −3.08, p = .002, 95% CI [−1.25, −0.27]), and mixed groups (b = −0.64, SE = 0.25, t(148) = −2.56, p = .01, 95% CI [−1.13, −0.14]), which positively predicted support for acceptance of refugees into the US (b = 0.32, SE = 0.08, t(145) = 3.83, p < .001, 95% CI [0.16, 0.49]). The indirect effect of the manipulation on policy support through perceived threat was not significant for any of the dummy variables (bs = −0.24, −0.19, and −0.23, SEs = 0.15, 0.12, and 0.15, 95% CIs [−0.59, 0.02], [−0.49, 0.01], and [−0.56, 0.02]). Likewise, the indirect effect through emotional response was also not significant, (bs = −0.05, −0.09, and 0.01, SEs = 0.06, 0.07, and 0.06, 95% CIs [−0.23, 0.03], [−0.28, 0.001], and [−0.09, 0.15]).

3.2. Study 2b

In Study 2b, we tested whether our hypotheses might also apply to German settings. Receiving more than 1 million refugees in 2015, Germany faced considerable public debate about how best to handle this crisis. Germany does not define itself as a nation of immigrants; in fact, immigrants are often described as a threat to the meaning and prestige of German national identity (Esses, Wagner, Wolf, Preiser, & Wilbur, 2006). Within the current socio-political atmosphere, we anticipated obtaining support for H1 and H2 with a German sample.

3.2.1. Method

3.2.1.1. Participants. We recruited 215 German participants on university campuses in Landau and Bamberg, Germany, in June 2016. After the exclusion of 13 participants who indicated nationalities other than German, our sample consisted of 202 participants (62 males, 137 females, 3 missing, M_{age} = 22.11, SD_{age} = 4.18). The sample size slightly exceeds the recommended 179 participants to yield a power of 0.80 to detect medium-sized effects (Cohen’s f = 0.25).

3.2.1.2. Measures. Using the same measures as in Study 2a, we assessed perceived cultural malleability (α = 0.82), emotional response (α = 0.49), support for acceptance of refugees into Germany (items were adapted to refer to Germany instead of the US, α = 0.79), attitudes toward Arabs, Muslims, and immigrants (α = 0.88), political affiliation (scale options were adapted to range from “Far Left” to “Far Right”, and reverse-coded before the analyses), and demographic variables (including nationality).

3.2.2. Results

Correlations between all dependent and control variables appear in Table 5.

3.2.2.1. Effects of the age manipulation. We conducted the same MANCOVA as in the previous studies. Both political affiliation and attitudes had significant relationships with the dependent variables, Fs (4, 190) = 6.05 and 15.67, ps < .001, ηp² = 0.11 and 0.25, respectively. The multivariate analysis showed a significant effect of the manipulation on the combination of the dependent variables, Wilks’ λ = 0.61, F(12, 502) = 8.75, p < .001, ηp² = 0.15. Univariate follow-up analyses showed that the manipulation had a significant effect on perceived cultural malleability, F(3, 193) = 20.78, p < .001, ηp² = 0.24. Pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni-adjusted significance values showed that participants considered child refugees (M_{adj} = 4.85, SE = 0.11) as more culturally malleable than adults (M_{adj} = 3.72, SE = 0.11, p < .001, M_{diff} = 1.13, 95% CI [0.71, 1.54]).

Notes. Values represent unstandardized coefficients. Total effect of the manipulation is indicated in parentheses. Covariates in the model are political affiliation and attitudes toward Muslims, Arabs, and immigrants.

*p < .05. **p < .01.
1.56), adults without identity cues (Madj = 4.01, SE = 0.12, p < .001, 95% CI [−1.16, −0.52]), and mixed groups (b = −1.00, SE = 0.16, t (193) = 16.36, 95% CI [0.58, 1.43]). The manipulation also had a significant effect on perceived threat, F(3, 193) = 16.36, p < .001, η² = 0.20. Participants reported that Germans would consider child refugees (Madj = 2.07, SE = 0.17) as less threatening than adults (Madj = 3.21, SE = 0.18, p < .001, Mdiff = −1.15, 95% CI [−1.79, −0.48]), adults without identity cues (Madj = 3.31, SE = 0.18, p < .001, Mdiff = −1.24, 95% CI [−1.91, −0.58]), and mixed groups (Madj = 3.72, SE = 0.18, p < .001, Mdiff = −1.65, 95% CI [−2.31, −0.99]). The main effect of the manipulation was not significant on emotional response or support for acceptance of refugees, F(3, 193) = 1.60, ps > .05.

### Table 5

Correlations between all dependent and control variables in Study 2b.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural malleability</th>
<th>Perceived threat</th>
<th>Emotional response</th>
<th>Support for acceptance</th>
<th>Political affiliation</th>
<th>Immigrant attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural malleability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived threat</td>
<td>−0.27**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional response</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>−0.00</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for acceptance</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>−0.15</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political affiliation</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant attitudes</td>
<td>−0.37**</td>
<td>−0.13</td>
<td>0.45**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

Mdiff = 0.84, 95% CI [0.41, 1.27]), and mixed groups (Madj = 3.85, SE = 0.11, p < .001, Mdiff = 1.01, 95% CI [0.58, 1.43]). The manipulation also had a significant effect on perceived threat, F(3, 193) = 16.36, p < .001, η² = 0.20. Participants reported that Germans would consider child refugees (Madj = 2.07, SE = 0.17) as less threatening than adults (Madj = 3.21, SE = 0.18, p < .001, Mdiff = −1.15, 95% CI [−1.79, −0.48]), adults without identity cues (Madj = 3.31, SE = 0.18, p < .001, Mdiff = −1.24, 95% CI [−1.91, −0.58]), and mixed groups (Madj = 3.72, SE = 0.18, p < .001, Mdiff = −1.65, 95% CI [−2.31, −0.99]). The main effect of the manipulation was not significant on emotional response or support for acceptance of refugees, F(3, 193) = 1.60, ps > .05.

#### 3.2.2.2. Mediation models. We tested the same mediation model as in the previous studies. As shown in Fig. 3, the results showed a significant indirect effect of the dummy variable comparing the child and adult conditions (b = −0.47, SE = 0.13, 95% CI [−0.76, −0.25]), the dummy variable comparing the child and adult without identity cues conditions (b = −0.35, SE = 0.11, 95% CI [−0.60, −0.16]), and the dummy variable comparing the child and mixed group conditions (b = −0.41, SE = 0.12, 95% CI [−0.69, −0.21]) on support for acceptance of refugees through cultural malleability. Exposure to child images led to greater perceived cultural malleability than adults (b = −1.13, SE = 0.16, t(193) = −7.15, 95% CI [−1.45, −0.82]), adults without identity cues (b = −0.84, SE = 0.16, t(193) = −5.17, (193) = −6.28, 95% CI [−1.32, −0.69]), which positively predicted support for acceptance of refugees into a host nation (b = 0.41, SE = 0.09, t (190) = 4.75, 95% CI [0.24, 0.58]). The indirect effect of the manipulation on policy support through perceived threat was not significant for any of the dummy variables, (bs = −0.10, −0.10 and −0.14, SEs = 0.07, 0.08 and 0.10, 95% CIs [−0.26, 0.03], [−0.27, 0.03] and [−0.35, 0.05]). Likewise, the indirect effect through emotional response was not significant (bs = −0.05, −0.04 and −0.02, SEs = 0.04, 0.04 and 0.03, 95% CIs [−0.16, 0.003], [−0.16, 0.004] and [−0.13, 0.02]).

#### 3.3. Discussion

In Studies 2a and 2b, we replicated the findings of Study 1 with both American and German samples. As in Study 1, we showed that participants considered child refugees to be more culturally malleable. This perceived difference between child and adults occurred regardless of whether representations of adults included explicit markers of ethnic/religious identity or not. Perceived cultural malleability, in turn, positively predicted support for acceptance of refugees into a host nation. Again, we found no evidence for the mediating role of perceived threat or emotional response in the relationship between exposure to refugee images and policy support.
4. General discussion

Our studies extend research on implicit theories and essentialism by providing evidence that children are perceived as more malleable than adults with regards to the cultural characteristics associated with their ethnic or religious group membership. Across three studies, we provide converging evidence for the role of perceived cultural malleability in the relationship between exposure to images of child refugees and policy support, using a simple manipulation with ecologically valid stimuli (i.e., existing images of Syrian refugees) with both American and German samples.

The greater perceived potential of children for cultural change and adaptation to a Western society emerged in comparison to adults who displayed explicit markers of identity or not, suggesting that the age of individuals is indeed the cue that participants are drawing upon when forming their perceptions of cultural malleability (as opposed to markers of ethnic/religious identity). The child images we used depicted young children, whereas the adult images depicted middle-aged adults. It might well be that the difference in perceived cultural malleability between children and adults would be reduced as the age difference becomes smaller. Future research could investigate this possibility.

Participants also reported higher perceived malleability in response to images of children than images of groups of refugees that also included children. This pattern suggests that exposure to child images have the intended effect of challenging cultural essentialist beliefs about refugees when the children are depicted alone as opposed to in the company of adults.

Importantly, our measure of policy support referred to acceptance of Syrian refugees in general into the host nation, and not the specific refugees depicted in the images. This suggests that exposure to representations of malleable group members may challenge the rigidity of cultural boundaries between ethnic groups, which is in line with previous work showing that implicit theories about individuals affect perception of groups (Levy et al., 2001). There may be cues other than age that can signal individual members’ potential for cultural malleability, and challenge perceptions of the essential cultural characteristics of an outgroup as a whole. Future research could examine how media representations of particular individuals (e.g., refugees who have successfully adapted to a host nation or contributed to a host society in exceptional ways) might shape beliefs regarding rigid, essential divides between immigrant groups and the host nation.

We did not find any evidence for the role of perceived threat in this process, despite the age manipulation having a medium-sized effect on perceived threat across the samples. It is important to note that we measured perceived threat using only one item across our studies. Symbolic threat in particular is a construct that is similar to our conceptualization of cultural malleability, as both refer to cultural values and beliefs. However, our measure of threat did not specify symbolic or realistic types of threat, both of which may potentially be relevant to reactions toward refugees. It is important for future research to examine how different types of threat as outlined by integrated threat theory (e.g., Stephan et al., 2005; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) may relate to cultural essentialist beliefs and play a role in policy support regarding refugees.

We also did not find evidence for the role of emotional response to refugee images in the examined process. However, strong reactions that people show in response to tragic stories of child refugees that become publicized hint at the possibility that observers may be more affected by stories of children than those of adults. Future research could investigate the possible consequences of emotions that exposure to the suffering of children evokes.

Finally, it is important to note that we conceptualized cultural essentialism as perceived cultural malleability (or potential to change and adapt) of a specific outgroup in our studies. Malleability (i.e., flexibility as opposed to fixedness) captures an important dimension of the construct of essentialism. However, it is possible to conceptualize and operationalize cultural essentialism in broader terms. Future research could measure essentialism defined as a general tendency, as opposed to specific perceptions regarding a particular group, and examine the effect of a manipulation of target age on general cultural essentialist beliefs. Alternatively, generalized essentialist tendencies can be examined as an individual difference variable that may moderate the effect of exposure to refugees on policy support.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that challenging perceptions of fixed and essential cultural characteristics of ethnic or religious groups that create rigid perceived divides between “us” and “them” can foster more inclusive public opinion about immigration. This is in line with previous work that advises cautious framing of group differences to avoid exaggeration and formation of negative stereotypes, which have negative implications for intergroup attitudes (Stephan et al., 2005). We are not advocating that cultural differences be ignored, or that immigrants fully assimilate to host cultures. We argue that the myth of impermeable boundaries between essentially different and uniform cultures is likely to breed negative reactions to the idea of coexistence with culturally different peoples. Representations of immigrants have the potential to guide public opinion in a more inclusive direction as opposed to creating perceptions of rigid cultural “others”.

Open practices

The experiments in this article earned Open Materials and Open Data badges for transparent practices. Materials and data for the experiment are available through the Online supplements.

Appendix A. Supplementary Materials

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.03.018.

References


Levine, M., & Thompson, K. (2004). Identity, place, and bystander intervention: Social


