

# When Refugees and Germans First Meet



First impressions count: first impressions of other people develop quickly and have a lasting impact on our behaviour. Psychologist MITJA BACK investigates in his empirical study “Integration at First Sight” at the Cluster of Excellence what first impressions Germans and refugees have of each other and which factors might foster integration.

**How do you conduct your investigations?** We have so far conducted two online studies in which German participants were asked to assess individual photographs of Germans, migrants, and refugees according to criteria such as likeability, trustworthiness, selfishness, and hostility. We gather in the same way the first impressions that refugees have of Germans. Then we expand the investigation to include direct encounters between Germans and refugees.

**What have you discovered?** Thus far we have found few systematic differences between the assessments made of refugees and Germans as such, but we have found differences within the groups doing the assessing and within those being assessed. That is, we found little evidence for general stereotypes that all Germans share and apply to all refugees; rather, there are large differences among the assessing Germans, and among the assessed refugees.

**What does this mean?** It is equally true for both the assessed refugees and Germans that appearance and facial expression play an important role: people who smile and are attractive are assessed more positively. Someone who scowls is assessed as more hostile. These are effects that we are already familiar with from research, and have much more influence than the factor of being a refugee or German.

The socio-demographic background plays an important role among the assessing Germans: older people, for example, assess those who look Middle Eastern as well as refugees more negatively. Other factors such as a low level of education, right-wing political attitude, and personality traits such as a tendency towards authoritarian attitudes also tend to lead to a negative evaluation of refugees.

**What conclusions do you draw from your findings?**

First, results show that, in assessing concrete individuals, people find in every group those that they consider likeable, and others that they consider more unlikeable. In contrast, more general surveys about abstract attitudes often confirm widespread stereotypes, which do not necessarily apply when judging concrete individuals. Second, when considering political interventions or educational measures, we cannot identify any “one-size-fits-all” solutions. Whether it is a question of integrating refugees better or dismantling German stereotypes, it is always necessary to do justice to people’s diversity.

**What role does religion play?**

The issue is religiously charged in many ways; there are appeals to Christian charity as well as groups calling for the defence of the Christian West. For this reason, we also provided in parts of the study information about the religious affiliation of the persons depicted, and found that those whom we identified as devoutly religious Muslims tended to be evaluated negatively. We plan to investigate more thoroughly the degree to which a person’s own religious affiliation or the strength of a person’s religiosity influences his or her evaluation of refugees.



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