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# Conflicting identities: cosmopolitan or anxious? Appreciating concerns of host country population improves attitudes towards immigrants

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This paper connects insights from the literature on cosmopolitan worldviews and the effects of perspective-taking in political science, (intergroup) anxiety in social psychology, and identity economics in a vignette-style experiment. In particular, we asked German respondents about their attitudes towards a Syrian refugee, randomizing components of his description ( $N = 662$ ). The main treatment describes the refugee as being aware of and empathetic towards potential worries in the German population about cultural change, costs, and violence associated with refugee inflows. This perspective-taking by the refugee increases the reported ability to empathize with the refugee and, especially for risk-averse people, reported sympathy and trust. We argue that acknowledging the potential concerns of the host population relieves the tension between an anxious and a cosmopolitan/open part of people's identities. Moreover, relieved tension renders people less defensive; i.e. when one aspect of identity is already acknowledged (expressing anxieties), it has less influence on actual behavior (expressing sympathy). In addition, previous contact with foreigners and a higher willingness to take risks are important factors in determining an individual's willingness to interact with refugees.

**Key words:** intergroup contact; intergroup anxiety; perspective-taking; identity; migration; integration; refugees.

## Introduction

The social and economic integration of refugees is one of the greatest challenges that EU countries currently face, especially so as most refugees are unlikely to return to their countries of origin in the near future due to the protracted nature of the underlying crises.<sup>1</sup> The successful integration of immigrants not only decreases the fiscal costs associated with hosting them but also increase cultural diversity, which is beneficial for long-run economic development (cf. [Alesina and La](#)

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Ferrara, 2005). A lack of integration, by contrast, can breed discontent and segregation and potentially lead to violent extremism (Bisin et al., 2011). Thus, many across the political spectrum demand that refugees actively integrate or assimilate into host populations.

Successful integration, however, is not simply the choice of refugees. A lot depends on the willingness of the host population to interact with and trust their new neighbors. Unfortunately, host populations often exhibit a tangible in-group bias (e.g. Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014) that makes them less willing to interact with foreigners. Also, native populations are often reluctant to let newcomers benefit from existing societal arrangements (e.g. Dahlberg et al., 2012; Alesina et al., 2023). Yet, simple negative utility from interacting (i.e. a preference-based explanation) and plain economic motives are insufficient to explain observed patterns in society (for a detailed literature review, see Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014).

With this paper, we aim to contribute to the interdisciplinary debate on integration and migration by bringing together insights from different disciplines—in particular, sociology, political science, psychology/social psychology, and economics—to shed further light on the determinants of successful integration. We emphasize an aspect of the debate, namely the explicit appreciation of the host population's concerns, which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been in the spotlight before but which, as we will argue, may add a relevant aspect to the ongoing debate. Before we describe the details of our study, we briefly review related thoughts from the literature to motivate our approach.

In recent years, for instance, more and more scholars in political science have expressed the view that the emergence of anti-immigrant parties in some parts of the EU is closely connected to a new cleavage in the political system that cuts across the left–right dimension. That cleavage is often labeled “cosmopolitan versus communitarian”, “open versus closed” or “green-alternative-libertarian versus traditional-authoritarian-nationalist”; see for example Zürn and de Wilde (2016) or Maxwell (2019). Moreover, many of the political parties on the “closed” part of the spectrum use topics such as the risk of crimes committed by irregular immigrants to make migration-related issues more salient, potentially build on existing intergroup anxiety and, thus, mobilize voters (cf. Dinas et al., 2019; Dustmann et al., 2019).<sup>2</sup> Yet, apart from situations of imminent threat, anxiety does not have a reputation of fostering helpful long-run behavioral patterns, such as trusting, peaceful, and mutually beneficial interaction of different groups.

However, social psychologists offer many insights regarding the drivers of intergroup anxiety, among them personal characteristics and attitudes, situational factors, and experiences (e.g. Stephan and Stephan, 1985; see Stephan, 2014, for a review). Potential contact with some (largely unknown) out-group members usually triggers some form of anxiety, often referred to as intergroup anxiety (cf. Stephan and Stephan, 1985; or Stephan, 2014), which influences behavior and attitudes towards the out-group. While initial levels differ between individuals, research on intergroup-contact theory (Allport 1954) has identified various effects in connection with intergroup contact that contribute to reduced anxiety and increased intergroup trust (see, for example, Pettigrew, 1998, Brown and Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Hewstone, 2009, 2015; Paluck et al., 2019; or Paolini et al., 2021, for general discussions). For example, testing a hypothesis expressed by Putnam (2007) that increased neighborhood diversity has a negative effect on intergroup attitudes and involvement in bridging social capital, Savelkoul et al. (2015) find no such general effect. In a similar vein, Schmid et al. (2014) find positive indirect effects of increased diversity via increased intergroup contact (see also Christ et al., 2014; or Hewstone and Schmid, 2014). Similarly, when the presence of actual immigrants replaces the abstract phenomenon of migration, concerns may decrease further (see, for example, Steinmayr, 2021; or Stolle et al., 2013).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, research in psychology shows that anxiety, personal uncertainty, and inner tension induce subjects to express more extreme views on various topics, including ingroup favoritism and religious zeal (see, for example, McGregor et al., 2001; McGregor and Jordan, 2007; McGregor et al., 2008; Nash et al., 2011; Hart et al., 2005), reduce perspective-taking (e.g. Todd et al., 2015), and also generally lead to reduced intake and processing of available (new) information (e.g.

Easterbrook, 1959; McGregor et al., 2012). Taken together, this research provides ample reasons why people might at least react cautiously toward immigrants or refugees.

Yet, the vast amounts donated and the efforts regularly made to help refugees<sup>4</sup> provide ample evidence that there generally is also a great willingness to help—and to be open and welcoming to people in need (see, for example, Leong, 2008, for a discussion of the different perspectives on immigrants as either enrichment or invasion). If contrasted with the above findings from (social) psychology, we thus find supporting evidence for both anxious and open attitudes toward refugees and immigrants. This observation constitutes a starting point for our study.

In order to capture the different aspects more formally, we rely on how social identity is understood by Akerlof and Kranton (2000), who introduced the idea into economics. In their (simplified) model, individuals possess different layers of identity that can become relevant depending on the context or, for example, cues provided by another person or a situation. Since identities overlap and several layers can be relevant in any given situation, they may come into conflict (see, for example, Wichardt, 2008, for a discussion of the effects of conflicting identities). For the present discussion, we assume that people have both an anxious and a cosmopolitan/open aspect of identity regarding refugees and will focus on the interplay of these.<sup>5</sup>

Now, consider a situation where a host population is faced with the inflow of a huge number of refugees (as was—and partly still is—the case of Syrian refugees in 2015 or, more recently, Ukrainian refugees in 2022). It seems reasonable to assume that in such a situation, both anxious and open attitudes/aspects of identity will be triggered—giving rise to conflicting goals. Thus, the situation entails at least two sources of tension (with the above-mentioned adverse consequences for cognition): intergroup anxiety and the goal conflict between helping and distancing (see McGregor et al., 2012, for how goal conflicts increase inner tension).

An extensive literature in clinical psychology argues that to alleviate the effects of anxiety, acceptance (instead of suppression) is an important step (e.g. Barlow et al., 2004; Levitt et al., 2004); in fact, there is a whole branch of behavioral therapy under the name of “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy” (e.g. Swain et al., 2013). Moreover, while own acceptance is key in therapy concepts, acceptance and validation by others are important as well (e.g. Leahy, 2002; Denton et al., 2009; Carson-Wong et al., 2018).<sup>6</sup> Based on the literature, we suspected that this mechanism could be used to reduce both intergroup anxiety and inner tension due to the goal conflict to restore more openness towards new information and improve attitudes towards refugees. In particular, we hypothesized that an empathetic, perspective-taking statement acknowledging less open traits in the host population—related to intergroup anxiety—fosters *more open* attitudes.

Note that this hypothesis is different from the common forms of perspective-taking often considered in the literature (e.g. Batson et al., 1997; Aberson and Haag, 2007; Batson and Ahmand, 2009; or Adida et al., 2018) in that we do not study the effect of perspective-taking of an in-group member has on their intergroup anxiety but the effect of perspective-taking of an out-group member on intergroup anxiety of in-group members. However, we are not the first to emphasize the importance of mutual understanding for fruitful social interaction. That (perceived) perspective-taking by others can have a positive effect on people whose perspective is taken—if the perspective-taker is believed to be capable of doing so—has been recognized, for example, by Goldstein et al. (2014). Moreover, the general observation that conveying acceptance and understanding is important for interpersonal relationships was already made by Rogers (1956); see Reis et al. (2017) for a discussion in the context of (romantic) relationships.<sup>7</sup>

To explore our hypothesis about perspective-taking in the context of immigration, we conducted an experiment in which citizens were asked to rate a person described as a Syrian refugee with respect to their general liking, trust, empathy, and willingness to interact personally with this person. As the main treatment (henceforth “P(erspective)-Taking” treatment) in a between-subject design, we introduced a statement in which the refugee acknowledges and shows empathy regarding worries of the host population about “overforeignization”, fiscal costs, and potentially increasing violence.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, he mentions the need for mutual respect and good community spirit.<sup>9</sup> To better understand the mechanisms, we also randomized the religion of the refugee

(Muslim/Christian) and had an additional treatment where the person was described as a German citizen and not as a refugee.<sup>10</sup>

In line with our hypothesis, we find that if the refugee is described as being empathetic towards concerns in the German population, reported likability and reported ability of perspective-taking increase substantially. The latter effect appears particularly relevant in view of findings that own perspective-taking improves intergroup attitudes and relations (e.g. Batson and Ahmad, 2009). Moreover, adding to the existing literature, we find that this effect holds particularly for more risk-averse people, a character trait closely linked to lower openness towards other people or new experiences. In fact, reported trustworthiness also increases substantially (especially) for risk-averse respondents. Our “P-Taking” treatment does not affect the stated willingness to interact personally (talk to, meet with a coffee, invite home), though. Regarding actual interaction, we find that having non-German friends or relatives in general has a positive effect on stated responses, which is consistent with earlier findings that emerging positive attitudes to one out-group seem to spread to other out-groups (cf. Hewstone, 2015). Moreover, we find that being more sociable and having low levels of risk aversion are relevant; for more intensive contact, low risk aversion is more important than self-reporting as sociable. Again, this is very much in line with the above-cited research on (social) psychology (e.g. McGregor et al., 2012; Todd et al., 2015) that suggests increased openness to the new situation once the inner tension is reduced.

In addition to the main study, we also conducted a follow-up experiment to assess how Germans would be seen by other Germans if expressing the same views as (allegedly) suggested by the refugee in the first study (the details are presented in Appendix E). Here, we find that when a German expresses their respective concerns, other Germans perceive this person as less cosmopolitan and more prone to voting for the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany. If we assume that being perceived as generally open-minded is desirable, the results of the follow-up experiment suggest that publicly acknowledging one's own intergroup anxiety may be socially costly. We emphasize this point, as it further supports our hypothesis that there indeed is a tension between cosmopolitan/open and anxious parts of the self and that the effect of the alleged statement of a refugee does not stem from its face value content (which would effectively ascribe attitudes to Germans which they would be hesitant to be openly associated with) but from relieving the tension between conflicting aspects of identity/goals.

Summing up, our experimental results suggest that acknowledging existing concerns and creating an atmosphere of (mutual) understanding—including acknowledging the potential concerns of the host population—may help to provide a better starting point for later interactions and, hence, increase the chances of successful integration. Of course, we do not want to over-interpret the results of our exploratory study. Yet, we see the reasonably high internal consistency of the different results and their general fit with the existing literature as supportive of the overall argument we make. Given the relevance of the general questions regarding intergroup relations, we thus hope that our study will prove helpful in understanding some of the underlying social forces.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: The next two sections report the experimental design and the empirical results. In Section 4, we discuss the results and relate them in more detail to the extant literature. Section 5 concludes, emphasizing limitations, possible avenues for future research, and pointing out the potential relevance of our results for policymakers and practitioners. The supplementary material and analyses are gathered in the online appendix.

## Design and procedures

### Design

The questionnaire used for our study shows a picture of a person who appears to be Arabic accompanied by six different sets of information that claim to refer to the person. In all cases, the person is described as being 34 years old, currently living in Hannover (Germany; as the study was conducted in Kiel and Rostock and we wanted a neutral reference), being married

Table 1. Translation of description for the case of a Muslim Syrian demonstrating openness (reflected in the last paragraph). The translation is literal to ensure that as much of subtle connotations as possible are preserved.

The photo shows Dawud M. (34, native Syrian). Until recently he lived with his wife and his two children in Syria and worked as a taxi driver. Because Dawud M. repeatedly criticized the current regime in Syria he had to flee despite his strong bond to his homeland (*literally*: “Heimat”).

Dawud M. describes himself as a devout Muslim, for whom family is very important. Currently, Dawud M. and his family are housed in Hannover, where he hopes to find work again soon.

Regarding the situation in Germany, Dawud remarked understanding for anxiety on the German side, for example with respect to “over-foreignization”, arising costs or increasing violence. Acknowledging these (*i.e. the anxiety/concerns*) was (*indirect speech*) important for mutual respect and a good community spirit (*literally*: “Miteinander”).

Table 2. Overview of treatments.

Nationality		Syrian		German
		No	Yes	No detail
P-Taking treatment				
Religion	Muslim	x	x	x
	Christian	x	x	x

Note: Titles in italics indicate the three dimensions that have been varied.

with two children, seeking a job and having worked as a taxi driver. The country of origin, gender, and relatively young age were designed to reflect typical characteristics of refugees from the recent wave.

The age was chosen to be somewhat higher than that of the modal migrant who arrived in Germany in 2015 to make the story credible. As previous research from France shows that a Muslim background is associated with lower integration and acceptance (cf. Adida et al., 2010 and 2016; Bansak et al., 2016), we also varied religion (and name) of the refugee between Muslim (Dawud) and Christian (Raphael), while always describing the person as religious. Moreover, as the main treatment variation, we varied whether the person has made a statement acknowledging potential concerns in the German host population regarding “over-foreignization” (“Überfremdung” in the German questionnaire), increasing violence and resulting costs; the treatment is referred to as the “P(erspective)-Taking” treatment. Finally, as a control treatment, we administered two versions describing the person as German, being either Muslim (Dawud) or Christian (Raphael), while using a comparable wording and story as much as possible (*i.e.*, being 34, living in Hannover,...). A translation of an example is provided in Table 1 and a summary of the treatment in Table 2; see Appendix A for further information on the study.

Following this information, the participants of our study were asked to answer the following questions on a 6-point Likert-scale:

1. How much do you like Dawud/Raphael?
2. How well can you put yourself into Dawud/Raphael’s shoes?
3. How fast is Dawud/Raphael going to integrate into German society? (Only for Dawud/Raphael described as Syrian.)
4. Generally, would you trust Dawud/Raphael?
5. Can you imagine talking to a person like Dawud/Raphael about his experiences?<sup>11</sup>
6. Can you imagine meeting a person like Dawud/Raphael for coffee or tea?<sup>11</sup>
7. Can you imagine inviting a person like Dawud/Raphael home?<sup>11</sup>

The questionnaire concludes with some general questions about the subject's age, gender, nationality, close non-German friends or relatives, income, and self-perception as sociable (6-points) and willingness to take risks (10 point scale; a question from the German Socio-Economic Panel, which has been found to be a rather stable measure of risk attitudes that correlates as predicted by [Lauriola and Levine \(2001\)](#) with Big Five Personality traits, cf. [Lönnqvist et al., 2015](#)). Following common practice in economics (e.g. [Gerber et al., 2013](#); [Lönnqvist et al., 2015](#); [Bolton and Werner, 2016](#)), we placed these questions after the treatment to avoid priming respondents by asking them about their personal characteristics first.<sup>12</sup>

## Procedures

The data for our study were collected in December 2015 and early in January 2016 in Kiel and Rostock.<sup>13</sup> In both cities, we approached people in the streets, asking whether they would be willing to support our research by answering a short questionnaire. In order to sample in comparable settings, we focused on similar locations (city centers where people were shopping for Christmas and a quieter location close to the sea); these data were gathered in December 2015. In addition, we invited students from different lectures at the University of Rostock to participate in the study; some of these data were gathered in early January, 2016. In total, 662 people responded to our questionnaire.

Note that in all cases the questionnaire versions were distributed randomly. Thus, while the sample is certainly not representative of any part of Germany, randomization implies that we have no reason to expect any systematic underlying biases across treatments, which might explain our results. Yet, just as in any laboratory experiment, the sample is, of course, affected by self-selection.<sup>14</sup>

## Empirical results

We now turn to our study's empirical results, which we will interpret in the Discussion section below.

### Summary statistics

Summary statistics for our study are provided in [Table 3](#). About half the sample (48%) was collected on the streets in Rostock/Kiel and the other half (52%) in lectures at the University of Rostock. All in all, the person in the vignette who makes the empathetic statement (i.e. appearing as "open" toward the potential host) was included in 34% of cases. He was described as Christian for 53% of the sample and as German for 31% of the sample. In line with our expectations, all covariates are balanced across treatments (see [Table A1](#) in [Appendix B](#)), which is reassuring given that they were measured after the treatment and responding to the questions that are the outcome variables.

### General treatment differences

For our main analysis, we use an ordered logit model for estimation. We tested all model specifications for the proportional odds assumption, sometimes also called the test of parallel lines; none of these tests reject the assumption. The baseline for all estimations is a Syrian who is a religious Muslim and gives no further indication of acknowledging the concerns of the host population.

A first analysis without controlling for personal characteristics shows that the "P-taking" treatment, i.e. describing the refugee as being aware of and open to the anxieties of the host population, makes him significantly more likable ([Table 4](#)). The effect size can be interpreted as log odds. Thus, the "P-Taking" treatment increases the log odds of having responded in a higher category on the 7-point scale by 0.367. If one calculates this as an odds ratio, it indicates a 44.4 percent increase in the probability of having responded in a higher category.



Table 3. Summary statistics.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
<i>Outcome variables</i>					
Liking	4.25	0.99	1	6	654
Empathy	3.85	1.45	1	6	661
Would trust	3.99	1.12	1	6	657
Would talk to	5.12	1.17	1	6	661
Would meet for coffee/tea	4.47	1.44	1	6	661
Would invite home	3.77	1.59	1	6	620
Expect fast integration	3.65	1.16	1	6	447
<i>Individual characteristics of respondents</i>					
Female	0.5	0.5	0	1	642
Age	32.62	17.56	10	87	639
Close relationship to foreigner	0.6	0.49	0	1	642
Sociable	4.57	1.06	1	7	640
Willingness to take risks/General risk attitude	5.79	1.98	1	10	640

Notes: Summary statistics reported in this table refer to all observations. All scales are 6-point except the risk scale which is 10-point. The question about fast integration was not included for in the "is German" treatment. Unequal sample size due to answers such as "Don't know" or failure to answer

Furthermore, participants in the "P-Taking" treatment show 0.355 log odds higher reported ability to put themselves into the reference person's position and also expect the refugee to integrate significantly faster. The result regarding the reported ability to empathize is particularly noteworthy due to the positive effects of such behavior on intergroup attitudes and relations (e.g. Batson and Ahmad, 2009).

However, there is no general treatment effect due to his perspective-taking on trust or the reported willingness to interact with the refugee by talking to him, meeting with him or inviting him. Thus, while making the reference person more likable and subjectively easier to empathize with, the "P-Taking" treatment does not affect the reported willingness to interact.

Random assignment of the religion has no statistically significant effect. This seems plausible because religion plays a far smaller role in Germany than in countries like the United States.<sup>15</sup> Describing the reference person as German Muslim or German Christian has no statistically significant effect on attitude scores. Yet, the reported willingness to talk to or meet with him is weakly lower. This may, for example, be due to a generally higher interest in the refugees and more openness towards recent arrivals than towards a German person with a migrant background.

In view of the reliability of the results, recall that our main hypothesis was that an empathetic statement acknowledging less open traits in the host population could foster more open attitudes. With seven outcome variables, there may be concerns about overrejecting the null hypothesis due to multiple hypothesis testing. To assess this risk, we calculate sharpened False Discovery Rate q-values (Anderson, 2008) for these seven p-values. These indicate sharpened q-values for the coefficients in columns 1, 2, and 7 of 0.134. That would indicate that, for each of these three indicators, there is approximately a probability of one in seven that it is a false rejection of the null hypothesis. Controlling for the false discovery rate, we can thus expect that  $3 \times 0.134 = 0.402$  of these three coefficients are a false positive.<sup>16</sup> Note, however, that the findings are not only internally consistent, i.e. we do not find significant positive effects on reported willingness to meet closely (home) but not more distantly (coffee), but also in line with the overall argument and earlier literature. Thus, we are confident that our overall argument and the corresponding empirical results point to a potentially relevant new aspect in the academic debate on intergroup anxiety and contact.



Table 4. Treatment effects for Syrian refugee including the “German” treatment.

	(1) likable	(2) empathy	(3) would trust	(4) would talk to	(5) would meet for coffee	(6) would invite home	(7) expect fast integration
<i>Treatments</i>							
Perspective-Taking	0.367** (0.171)	0.355** (0.169)	-0.006 (0.173)	0.016 (0.181)	0.036 (0.173)	-0.199 (0.177)	0.337* (0.172)
Is Christian	0.074 (0.143)	0.001 (0.138)	0.222 (0.141)	-0.004 (0.149)	-0.205 (0.141)	-0.116 (0.147)	0.228 (0.172)
Is German	0.183 (0.181)	0.042 (0.174)	-0.159 (0.178)	-0.313* (0.181)	-0.288* (0.171)	-0.159 (0.180)	
Location FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	654	661	657	661	661	620	447
P-values	0.032	0.035	0.974	0.928	0.837	0.262	0.050
Sharpened q-values	0.134	0.134	0.884	0.884	0.884	0.355	0.134

Notes: Estimates from an ordered logit model with the reported regressors. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. The location fixed effect is a dummy that is one in the West German location and 0 in the East German location. A version without the fixed effect can be found in Table A2. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ . The p-values and sharpened q-values reported at the bottom of the table refer to the perspective-taking treatment. The baseline vignette is a Muslim refugee from Syria who does not provide the statement acknowledging German concerns. The question about fast integration was not included in the “is German” treatment. The sample size in column 6 is smaller due to a printing issue on the first day of field work. This is not driving any results. Differences in observations result from some subjects not answering all questions.

## Influence of respondent's characteristics

It is unlikely that all respondents react in the same way to the "P-Taking" treatment. In particular, risk and anxiety are known to interact closely (e.g. [Giorgetta et al., 2012](#)), thus potentially moderating the relationship. Moreover, we can say more about treatment effect heterogeneity by accounting for individual characteristics, context dummies, and adding an interaction term between "P-Taking" treatment and risk aversion. Regression results without the (risk) interaction term are reported in Table A4 in the appendix. These indicate that people who are one point more willing to take risks on the ten-point scale have 0.101 higher odds of rating the refugee as more likable. They also state they are likelier to trust, meet, and invite him.

As [Table 5](#) shows, introducing the interaction term reveals substantial heterogeneity in the "P-Taking" treatment. In particular, the reported liking and the stated willingness to trust are strongly positively correlated with describing the reference person as open to concerns in the host population. As can be seen from the interaction term between risk and "P-Taking", the effect is particularly strong for risk-averse individuals (recall that risk aversion is measured on a 1 to 10 scale with high numbers indicating a high willingness to take risks); tests for non-linear interaction terms in ordered outcome models indicate robustness of our interaction effects.<sup>17</sup>

The estimated coefficients indicate that a person with a one point higher willingness to take risks on average has a 0.249 smaller increase in the log odds due to the "P-Taking" treatment. Moving from the 75th to the 25th percentile of the risk attitude in our sample (from 7 to 4), the estimated treatment effect increases by over 43%. Thus, the positive treatment effect of describing the reference person as open is particularly large among more risk-averse individuals. In addition, higher levels of risk tolerance have a statistically highly significant and sizeable positive effect on most of the attitude variables in their own right, indicating that more risk-averse individuals catch up with their more risk-tolerant peers due to the treatment. As in [Table 4](#) above, we can consider the risk of false discoveries. As reported at the bottom of [Table 5](#), the four statistically significant coefficients on perspective-taking have sharpened *q*-values of 0.039, indicating that we can expect 0.156 out of the four to be false discoveries. There is thus evidence that the effect of perspective-taking on reported sympathy and trust is moderated by the respondent's risk attitude.

More generally, in our sample, having a self-perception as being sociable is strongly positively associated with likability and empathy in columns 1 and 2, women are more empathetic but less trusting, and pre-existing close relations to a foreigner have a (weakly significant) positive effect on trust. Moreover, older people report higher levels of empathy. The location also seems to play a role, as respondents in Kiel reported being more trusting than those in Rostock—both on the streets and in a university setting. That aligns with the many studies that have found persistent differences between West and East Germany, for example, summarized in [Brosig-Koch et al. \(2011\)](#).

Regarding the different variables measuring a willingness to interact, self-reporting as more sociable is strongly positively correlated with willingness to interact with the reference person. However, the effect is far smaller when it comes to the question of inviting him home. By contrast, the respective coefficients for respondent's risk attitude—columns 4 to 6—increase towards the right of the table and reach higher levels of statistical significance the closer the contact referred to in the question becomes. Thus, the data suggest that more sociable people are more willing to have some contact with a person such as a refugee. However, if a sociable person is also risk averse, they would not be more likely to invite the person to meet up. The reported willingness to establish such close contact is systematically more strongly linked to risk aversion than to sociability.

Moreover, respondents who have close relationships with foreigners through friends or family are far more willing to get into contact with someone similar to the reference person. In fact, the respective outcome variables, which seek to measure the willingness to integrate actively, have particularly large point estimates.

A further point that deserves a brief mention is that none of the variables shows a statistically significant correlation with the expected speed of integration. The reason for this might simply be a lack of experience on the side of the respondents.

Table 5. Treatment effects for Syrian refugee including the “German” treatment as well as an interaction of risk attitude and perspective-taking by the refugee.

	(1) likable	(2) empathy	(3) would trust	(4) would talk to	(5) would meet for coffee	(6) would invite home	(7) expect fast integration
<i>Treatments</i>							
Perspective-taking	1.748*** (0.585)	0.776 (0.614)	1.377** (0.541)	−0.141 (0.548)	0.384 (0.523)	0.294 (0.520)	0.340 (0.568)
Perspective-taking × risk	−0.249*** (0.096)	−0.074 (0.096)	−0.233*** (0.089)	0.018 (0.089)	−0.063 (0.086)	−0.091 (0.083)	−0.004 (0.097)
Is Christian	0.088 (0.148)	0.046 (0.142)	0.263* (0.147)	0.097 (0.157)	−0.146 (0.146)	−0.038 (0.153)	0.198 (0.177)
Is German	0.196 (0.182)	0.036 (0.177)	−0.154 (0.183)	−0.359* (0.188)	−0.253 (0.174)	−0.112 (0.183)	
<i>Individual Characteristics</i>							
Female	0.010 (0.156)	0.297** (0.146)	−0.335** (0.151)	−0.054 (0.160)	−0.265* (0.153)	−0.340** (0.151)	−0.215 (0.184)
Age	−0.043 (0.031)	0.048* (0.027)	−0.013 (0.030)	0.057** (0.027)	0.116*** (0.029)	0.090*** (0.031)	0.031 (0.037)
Age squared	0.000 (0.000)	−0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	−0.001** (0.000)	−0.001*** (0.000)	−0.001*** (0.000)	−0.000 (0.000)
Close to foreigner	0.254 (0.156)	0.147 (0.148)	0.289* (0.154)	0.519*** (0.163)	0.425*** (0.153)	0.552*** (0.158)	−0.000 (0.182)
Sociable	0.197** (0.078)	0.255*** (0.082)	0.101 (0.083)	0.398*** (0.087)	0.222*** (0.080)	0.097 (0.076)	0.145 (0.092)
Risk attitude	0.186*** (0.052)	0.110** (0.055)	0.223*** (0.050)	0.056 (0.048)	0.126*** (0.045)	0.178*** (0.050)	0.038 (0.061)
<i>Context</i>							
Data from Kiel	0.163 (0.243)	−0.192 (0.218)	0.717*** (0.223)	0.290 (0.229)	0.207 (0.217)	0.362 (0.253)	0.309 (0.262)
Data from Uni (Rostock)	−0.542*** (0.256)	−0.308 (0.237)	−0.136 (0.260)	0.007 (0.266)	−0.048 (0.241)	−0.134 (0.257)	−0.105 (0.319)
Observations	628	633	630	633	633	593	429
P-values (Main)	0.003	0.206	0.011	0.798	0.462	0.572	0.549
Sharpened q-values (Main)	0.039	0.703	0.039	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
P-values (Interaction)	0.009	0.440	0.005	0.843	0.462	0.270	0.963
Sharpened q-values (Interaction)	0.039	1.000	0.039	1.000	1.000	0.819	1.000

Notes: Estimates from an ordered logit model with the reported regressors. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ . The p-values and sharpened q-values reported at the bottom of the table refer to the perspective-taking treatment. Please note that the question about fast integration was not included in the “is German” treatment. The base outcome for context is data gathered on the street in Rostock. Differences in observations result from some subjects not answering all questions.

Finally, despite reporting higher empathy, women in our sample are significantly less willing to meet or invite the reference person over. The documented pattern of women being just as likely to meet while reporting a markedly lower willingness to invite them home is in line with perceived barriers to getting into close contact with the opposite gender as well as with avoiding the higher risks faced in such a one-to-one situation with a stranger. Furthermore, while reported empathy increases with age<sup>18</sup>, our evidence suggests that the willingness to be closely involved with the refugee has an inverse u-shape in age.

## Discussion

In the following, we discuss and interpret our main results and relate our findings to the existing literature. In a nutshell, the results from the previous section show that the empathetic statement of a purported Syrian refugee regarding potential immigration-related worries in the German population renders him substantially more likable, easier to empathize with, and, especially for more risk-averse people, also more trustworthy for German respondents. Moreover, if a German is described as expressing the respective concerns regarding immigrants (Questionnaire 2 as described in [Appendix E](#); there only students were invited to participate), he appears more right-wing and less cosmopolitan/open-minded (both arguably rather undesirable attributes for most of the population).

As we have argued in the introduction, a possible explanation for these results can be found in a combination of different findings from (social) psychology. On the one hand, clinical psychology suggests that acceptance of anxiety reduces its effects (e.g. [Barlow et al., 2004](#); [Levitt et al., 2004](#)). On the other hand, abundant research from social psychology demonstrates that if people experience goal conflicts, uncertainty, or a threat to the self (in various forms), this causes anxiety and leads to people becoming relatively more favorable of the in-group, generally expressing more extreme views on various topics, and being less open to new information (e.g. [Easterbrook, 1959](#); [Hart et al., 2005](#); [McGregor et al., 2001, 2012, 2015](#); [Nash et al., 2011](#); [Todd et al., 2015](#)); the effects of reverting to various forms of zeal appear to be particularly strong for people with low implicit self-esteem ([McGregor and Jordan, 2007](#)). As [Nash et al. \(2011, p. 1291\)](#) write: “We propose that adults become reactively extreme because doing so activates approach-motivated states that shield them from the anxious uncertainty aroused by goal conflicts.” Put differently, once people become uncertain, they tend to pick “some” goal and focus on it simply to escape the negative affect (see [McGregor, 2006](#), for a review of various threats that trigger such phenomena and a relation to neuroscience).

Now consider the situation described to the subjects of our study, i.e. a person confronted with a description and a picture of an incoming refugee (at a time when the refugees from Syria—their need as well as challenges to the German population—were extremely salient in the German media). It seems reasonable to assume that most people will experience both an open-minded willingness to help and worries regarding consequences for the German (host) population—abstractly referred to as intergroup anxiety (see [Stephan and Stephan, 1985](#), for a general discussion). The simultaneous presence of both entails an implicit goal conflict (put simply, be either welcoming or anxious and distancing).

We propose that what the result of our study demonstrates is that if the anxious part of these cognitions is positively acknowledged by the purported refugee, this has two positive effects in line with the literature cited above: (1) subjects experience acceptance for their anxious worries; (2) the goal conflict is (partly) relieved as the worries are already named and acknowledged. Taken together, this reduces the need for defensive mechanisms (e.g. expressing extreme views (e.g. [McGregor et al., 2012](#)), being more egocentric (cf. [Todd et al., 2015](#)), less open for new information (e.g. [Nash et al., 2011](#)), and more schematic outgroup perceptions (cf. [Stephan and Stephan, 1985](#))) and thereby restores a general openness towards refugees—reflected in more open responses by the subjects.

An alternative, albeit closely related, explanation would be in terms of an economic model of identity (cf. [Akerlof and Kranton, 2000, 2005](#)). For the sake of argument, let us focus on two aspects of identity that correspond to the main aspects of the explanations discussed above: an open or cosmopolitan identity and a separate one related to intergroup anxiety, both returning positive utility if served. Similar to the above argument, one could then argue that the observed treatment effect derives from the fact that once the anxious part of identity is acknowledged (through the empathetic statement of the refugee), it is more rewarding for subjects to express open views (than if the anxious part is not yet accounted for).

In our view, the cosmopolitan part of identity is a rather unlikely source of the effect, though. “Cosmopolitan” or “open” usually refers to a wider experience with different cultures, i.e. a weaker attachment to local ideas or prejudices. Thus, a cosmopolitan identity can generate identity utility when expressing sympathy for someone who is different. However, the empathetic statement of the reference person arguably reduces differences between the refugee and the German experimental participant. Hence, the empathetic statement should rather decrease the marginal benefits of expressing a certain degree of sympathy as derived from the cosmopolitan self. Following this line of reasoning, a possible way to further test our line of reasoning could, for example, be to evaluate the impact of a perspective-taking statement regarding some more tangible anxiety on reported emotional responses by subjects with some form of induced anxiety. As suggested by the results from the additional questionnaire ([Appendix E](#)), expressing concerns about immigration as a German conflicts with being perceived as cosmopolitan.

That is highlighted by the German person's increased association with the populist farright AfD party, which is anti-immigrant and repeatedly refers to the downside risks of hosting refugees. However, the “P-Taking” treatment changes the context in a way that any related concerns a respondent may have already been acknowledged and do not need to be accounted for by a more cautious stance towards the presented refugee.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, there is reason to believe that the marginal benefit from reducing the expressed degree of sympathy derived from the anxious part of the identity is smaller under the treatment than in the control condition.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, there might be alternative explanations for our observations, albeit we find it difficult to think of other mechanisms that could have led to the patterns in the data. Nevertheless, we want to discuss two alternative explanations that deserve particular attention.

First, a refugee who makes the empathetic statement signals that he better understands the host society and, therefore, might be better able to adjust to it. Respondents who are more risk averse could be expected to respond more strongly to this treatment and hence update their expectation of fast integration more strongly. That would result in a positive treatment effect in [Table 4](#), column 7, and a positive interaction effect in [Table 5](#), column 7. While the former exists, the latter does not, though. Hence, while the alternative mechanism we outline here could explain the positive and weakly significant main treatment effect of the statement in [Table 4](#), it is difficult to explain why this effect differs with the respondent's risk attitude.

Second, a valid related question would be if the finding regarding risk aversion is driven by risk-averse respondents being more concerned about migration or leaning more to the right. As we did not collect the latter two variables in the experiment (which would likely have interfered with the treatment), we have no direct evidence on this question. Yet, an analysis of data from the German Socioeconomic Panel (SOEP), which covers all three variables for the years 2013 (risk attitude) or 2014 (left/right orientation and concerns about immigration), shows no significant relationship between risk aversion and left/right orientation or concerns about immigration (see [Appendix D](#) for details).<sup>21</sup> Thus, as we see no obvious reason to believe that our sample was structurally different from the SOEP regarding these variables, we conclude that risk attitude is unlikely to be closely related to either left/right orientation or the likelihood that a person has concerns about immigration and that this relationship also extends to our sample (which was collected in Germany at around the same time).

Finally, we want to emphasize how our study relates to the literature on the positive effects of perspective-taking on intergroup contact (e.g. [Brown and Hewstone, 2005](#); [Hewstone, 2015](#))

and, in particular, intergroup anxiety (see, e.g., Batson et al., 1997; Aberson and Haag, 2007; Batson and Ahmad, 2009; Kalla and Brookman, 2021; for a discussion). Put simply, the common observation in the literature on intergroup anxiety is that perspective-taking reduces intergroup anxiety and improves intergroup relations. However, most of this literature considers how an in-group member is affected by personally taking an out-group member's perspective. By contrast, we consider empathetic perspective-taking of an out-group member, particularly the effect of being informed about this on in-group members. Perspective-taking, thus, is done by another person (see also Goldstein et al., 2014). Notably, though, and in line with the discussion Goldstein et al. (2014) and the more general and highly enlightening arguments provided by Rogers (1956), the results of our study indicate that such perspective-taking of an out-group member increases the reported ability of (reciprocal) perspective-taking of in-group members. While not further addressed in the present study, this suggests an additional avenue to improve intergroup relations given what is known about the relevance of perspective-taking by in-group members, namely by conveying to others that their perspective is also acknowledged (see Reis et al., 2017, for a discussion about related effects in the context of (romantic) relationships).

Moreover, if understood as suggested, the effect reported here also indicates one potential underlying mechanism for the common discussion of perspective-taking. In particular, as Todd et al. (2015) point out, increased levels of anxiety hamper perspective-taking. Hence, although not explicitly addressed in our study, we would speculate that an empathetic perspective-taking of an out-group member facilitates perspective-taking as commonly understood, namely, by relieving the tension between different goals—openness and anxiousness—and thereby reducing the need for defensive mechanisms that might get in the way otherwise.

## Concluding remarks

In the preceding sections, we have presented results from a vignette study showing that an empathetic statement of a purported refugee increases open responses in the queried subjects from the German population. To explain the observed effect, we have referred to social and clinical psychology literature that argues that conflicting goals or other facets of uncertainty trigger anxiety, which in turn increases self- and in-group focus and a tendency to express more extreme views on various topics. Acknowledging these findings, we have put forward that the empathetic statement relieves the tension between cosmopolitan/open and anxious/closed cognitions related to the inflow of refugees at the time, facilitating a more open attitude in their response patterns.

Regarding the general discussion regarding immigrants and prejudices (see Paluck et al., 2021, for a review), we believe that the results and the discussion provided in this paper suggest several potentially interesting implications. If, for example, prejudices are partly a shortcut solution to general uncertainties—not necessarily related to the respective outgroup—the previous discussion would suggest that addressing (and acknowledging) the underlying uncertainties and worries might be a promising way to reduce prejudices.

Moreover, in the broader discussion of whether attitudes towards immigrants are driven by egocentric or sociotropic economic concerns or rather cultural concerns (see the survey papers by Ceboanu and Escandell, 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014), our findings and in particular the cited literature from social psychology can be interpreted as tentatively speaking to the latter. More specifically, given the general evidence, it seems likely that economic concerns can be grouped with the general defensive focus on “some” goal—not necessarily related to their core concern—to relieve the tension from goal conflicts (cf. Nash et al., 2011). Simply put, a person worried about group differences might refer to economic concerns as an easy and often well-received way to relieve tension. By contrast, if cultural concerns are raised, they might be considered closer to the underlying intergroup anxiety, which is likely to derive at least partly from cultural differences. That economic concerns are nonetheless often raised instead of cultural ones might arguably be due to the former concerns being more socially acceptable.

Moreover, in view of the discussion about intergroup contact theory (e.g. Allport, 1954; Brown and Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006, 2008; Pettigrew et al., 2011; Paolini et al., 2021) and, especially, the relevance of perspective-taking in connection with intergroup anxiety (e.g. Batson et al., 1997; Aberson and Haag, 2007; Batson and Ahmad, 2009), we believe that the present study indicates a relevant additional aspect, namely the potentially positive effect of expression of perspective-taking as a means to affect the reduction of defensive behavior and the increase in openness towards others. In particular, the positive effects of observed perspective-taking on one's willingness to do so seem promising in this regard.

Regarding the limitations of our study, we want to mention the choice of subjects (voluntary participants from northern Germany, including students) and the number of observations ( $N = 662$ ) with respect to the number of hypotheses tested (7). As we have argued in Section 3, the statistical risk of false positive estimates remains limited even if we treat our hypotheses as independent. Moreover, we see the internal consistency of our findings and their general fit with the literature as a reason to believe that our findings are not coincidental. In fact, we see the contribution of our study not only in the data analysis but also in the combination of ideas and insights from different disciplines in a coherent argument, which is supported by the data. Taken together, we are confident that future research with different subjects and in slightly varied contexts will provide supportive evidence for the general line of argument made in the present paper.

In any case, we hope the present discussion has highlighted the potential benefits of interdisciplinary approaches to improve our understanding of societal issues. Among the usual studies that seek explanations for why non-economic concerns play such an important role, sociologists, psychologists, economists, and political scientists have often used similar survey-based or experimental approaches (see, e.g., Dražanová et al., 2024, for a recent meta-study) and are nowadays more often integrating explanations from different social science disciplines. Regarding intergroup contact research in particular, this also ties in well with the emphasis on openness to diverse ideas expressed by Paolini et al. (2021).

To conclude, we want to return once more to the more specific results of our study and speculate about some broader implications. Specifically, from a policy perspective, our analysis would support a suggestion that if we want to improve general attitudes toward incoming refugees and other immigrants to facilitate their successful integration, it is crucial to take the concerns of the host population seriously. Expressed in terms of the main argument of this paper: acknowledging the population's anxious traits in the general discussion increases the room for open traits to prevail in individual behavior. Of course, we do not mean to imply that one has to give in to any concerns being expressed, especially if they are not in line with the facts. However, creating a climate where concerns can be expressed and are met with a general willingness to listen appears to be essential.

## Endnotes

1. The main ideas behind this paper were first developed at the height of the humanitarian crisis in Syria and refugee movements to Europe.
2. Note that people on the cosmopolitan part of the spectrum are commonly more open to foreigners. However, refugees fleeing persecution or war are generally more welcome across the political spectrum (see, for example, the distinction in the supplementary material in Bansak et al., 2016).
3. See Aberson and Haag (2007) for a discussion of how contact between groups reduces intergroup anxiety, both directly and via perspective-taking. See Ramiah and Hewstone (2013) for a review of intergroup contact research focusing on prejudice.
4. e.g. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2022/3/622f7d1f4/private-sector-donates-us200-million-unhcrsukraine-emergency-response.html> (13.02.2023)



5. For a discussion of different determinants of the degree of cosmopolitan values see [Katz-Gerro et al. \(2024\)](#).
6. As a simplified example, consider the case where a patient is required to accept their anxiety by a therapist who does not simultaneously express her own (external) acceptance for it but instead describes it as unreasonable and an obvious expression of madness. Eventually, the external acceptance of the self (including the anxiety) is what ensures continued belonging to the in-group, thereby facilitating internal acceptance of the anxiety.
7. Somewhat related, for example, [Lees and Cikare \(2020\)](#) demonstrate the positive effect of simply providing correcting information about out-groups on negative out-group attributions.
8. Even if actual crime rates often do not increase, [Ajzenman et al. \(2023\)](#) show that concerns regarding crime increase in areas with higher numbers of immigrants and may lead to increased right-wing voting.
9. The German term “Überfremdung”, used in the questionnaire, is literally translated as over-foreignization here to ensure that its meaning is preserved. The word captures fears about cultural heterogeneity introduced by immigrants and has a negative connotation.
10. Since the large majority of Syrian refugees at the time of the experiment were male and these were seen with much more skepticism in the German population, we do not evaluate attitudes to a female refugee.
11. Note that we only asked about interacting with someone *similar* to the reference person to avoid triggering expectations to actually be presented to the person on the spot—a belief we would have been unable to control for.
12. We are aware that different disciplines take a different stance on this issue (cf. [Montgomery et al., 2018](#), for a discussion). We have no intention to pass any kind of general judgment here. Yet, we believe that in the present setting, the reasons for the chosen order are very plausible. In order to check for possible influences of the treatment on answer patterns on individual characteristics (esp. risk attitude and being sociable), we carried out balance tests that do not yield any significant differences in covariates (Table A1).
13. Kiel and Rostock are old Hanseatic league cities in the north of Germany located at the Baltic coast—Kiel being in West Germany and Rostock in East Germany.
14. Participation rates were around 20% (city center), between 30 and 60% (sea) and close to 100% (lecture).
15. Due to Germany’s past persecution of citizens based on their faith, official data do not include the religion of citizens. Official estimates based on the 2011 census state that Kiel had a share of foreign population of 7.8 percent and Rostock of 3.7 percent ([Destatis, 2014](#)). Further tests show that the effect of religion is strongest among university students in Rostock, the group with the lowest likelihood of personal experience; this is compatible with the idea that experience is relevant for intergroup anxiety (cf. [Stephan, 2014](#)).
16. If we make the adjustment jointly for all 27 hypothesis tests (including the fixed effect) in [Table 4](#), the q-value indicates that the three statistically significant coefficients for “P-Taking” are significant at an FDRs of 0.131, 0.131, and 0.157, respectively, i.e.  $0.131 + 0.131 + 0.157 = 0.419$  out of the three coefficients can be expected to be false discoveries.
17. One might suspect that risk aversion is correlated with being more sociable. To test this concern, we added a control variable to the questionnaire. Adding an interaction term between self-reporting as sociable and the “P-Taking” treatment does not yield any significant effects. The treatment effect heterogeneity with respect to risk is thus not driven by more sociable individuals.
18. As 44.5% of the population of Schleswig-Holstein—the province of which Kiel is the capital—were themselves refugees in 1949 due to an influx of 1.18 million registered refugees at the end of the Second World War ([State of Schleswig-Holstein, 1990](#)), many respondents supposedly have parents, grandparents, and other close relatives with personal experience of becoming displaced.

19. Note how the positionality of the German and the Syrian refugee matters at this point. Acknowledging these concerns as a Syrian refugee is not understood as signaling allegiance with German far-right parties because few respondents would expect a refugee to support political parties that strongly discriminate against him. Instead, the statement constitutes perspective-taking by the refugee, signaling that the person is empathetic and not at all hostile to the members of the host population. As the data show, this signal appears especially relevant for risk-averse members of the host population.
20. Note that simply arguing that expressing empathy is likable by itself would, by contrast, not offer an alternative mechanism that could explain treatment effect heterogeneity in respondents' risk attitude.
21. Sample sizes of 3000–3500 individuals make this a relatively precisely estimated zero effect. Note that Oshri et al. (2023) even find a negative link between risk attitude and willingness to vote for far-right parties in a broader sample of European countries.

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## Supplementary material

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## Data availability

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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