

Refugee integration – Thoughts about what NOT to say and do

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Emily Warrender

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In the article, Philipp C. Wichardt highlights the importance of empathy in addressing anxiety about refugee movements. He argues that dismissing these fears is unhelpful; instead, acknowledging and validating them fosters connection and openness, ultimately reducing tensions and promoting integration

About ten years ago, Angela Merkel expressed her confidence in Germany's and Europe's social resilience in connection with the European migrant crisis by saying, "Wir schaffen das!" (We will make it!). At the time, it was primarily the civil war in Syria that was driving refugee numbers up. Since then, however, the Russian war against Ukraine has led to considerable additional movements putting further tension on, for instance, social security systems and local housing markets. This still discounts common movements of political asylum seekers and economic migrants reaching European borders each year. So, did we make it?

Growing polarization surrounding refugee movements

Today, we are facing an increasingly heated and polarized debate about migration, including calls for more restrictive EU asylum laws or within EU border controls, and right-wing parties are on the rise in many EU countries. Of course, we also witnessed Brexit, political turns in the US, the Israel-Palestine crisis, and the somewhat uncontrollable migration of a certain virus in the early 2020s. Yet, evidence for "having made it" seems rather scant.

So, was Angela Merkel wrong in her confidence, or was she, perhaps, just unfortunate in expressing it the way she did? And what can we do about the increasing polarization concerning refugee movements? What would a reasonable response to current issues look like?

Empathy and perspective-taking as remedies to anxiety

First of all, anxiety is not a rational choice, but an emotional reaction. To see why, consider a person, say Anton, who is afraid of spiders and is close to freaking out seeing a spider. What advice would we give a bystander trying to help? Would we suggest to freak out, too, and run away jointly? Probably not. Would we propose to tell Anton that there is no need to freak out and to stop making a fuss? This, arguably, is a common approach in such instances. Yet, it almost never helps to tell someone afraid of something that this is unnecessary. Deep down, most people cognitively already know. Difficult emotions need empathizing, not ignorance. Empathy and perspective-taking are what

fosters connection and relieves tensions. Once emotional tensions are reduced, openness to other perspectives increases. This holds for spiders as well as almost any other experienced threat.

In fact, in a questionnaire study conducted at the height of the civil war in Syria, we found that German participants respond more favorably to an alleged Syrian refugee, who is described to them, if the refugee is presented as acknowledging worries about refugees in the German population (Heidland & Wichardt, 2025). Thus, perspective-taking is what increases openness, even if it does not dissolve all reservations.

Expressed in the case of Anton: A more fruitful approach to help would be to take the perspective and acknowledge the anxiety first. This may even include taking a joint step backward to get a better view from a less threatening position. Only then can we attempt to create more openness for the idea that the spider is not as dangerous as it might seem. Even then, we may not fully convince Anton but may only get a better idea of what his anxiety really is about and where help is really needed. Rarely, European spiders are the ultimate source of excessive anxiety.

Indeed, research from social psychology shows that anxieties in one domain lead to more extreme responses in other domains (e.g., Nash et al., 2011). Intuitively, suppose I am seriously worried about how to pay next month's rent. In that case, I will be less willing to listen to someone else's troubles and respond rather superficially and in a less differentiated way, i.e., more extreme. Also, Anton's arachnophobia is likely to be worse. Similarly, the more a person is under some form of personal threat, the more likely responses to questions about refugees are to become extreme (polarized). In this respect, it may come as no surprise that uncertainty tends to drive people to more radical parties.

Thus, regarding refugee integration, I believe there are two important insights to keep in mind. First, if people are afraid and express worries, it almost never helps to ignore these worries – whatever rational reason may tell us. Thus, simply saying “We will manage!” as Angela Merkel did was not helpful, even if it may have otherwise been a correct assessment and a well-intended statement, meant to encourage. Second, if the facts do not support the intensity of the worries expressed, the real threat likely lies elsewhere. Again, this is not to say that the worries actually expressed may well be ignored. It says that proper relief of the tension will require measures at a different target.

With respect to the current debate, it seems reasonable to at least consider the possibility that other issues are driving worries about various forms of migration (economic change, political uncertainties, etc.) and that these need reliable solutions. Of course, current public sentiment about migration should not be ignored. Just as a step back for Anton may be necessary to lose focus on the spider, abandon defensive patterns, and reestablish openness to reason, stricter asylum rules may currently be needed to relieve social tension. Yet, as Anton would probably regret moving houses due to a single spider,

going too far with protectionism is likely to lead to similar regrets as it would drive a wedge between significant groups of people who might both benefit from getting along well (see also Wichardt, 2008; von Deylen & Wichardt, 2024).

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- Philipp C. Wichardt is a professor of economics at the University of Rostock and a research affiliate at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy and CESifo, Munich. His interdisciplinary research focuses on psychological determinants of individual decision making and philosophy of science. Recently, worries about migration, social identity and the polarization in society have become a central topic in his research.

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