

THEMATIC ARTICLES: ASSESMENTS OF IMMIGRATION POLICIES

Contact, Perceptions of Threat, and Assessment of Migration Policies in Malta

Karina KOROSTELINA and Lynette CAMILLERI

Abstract. Numerous studies examine the effectiveness of the contact hypothesis in resolving conflict. While ample research has been conducted regarding the prevalence of xenophobia with the rise of the refugee crisis worldwide and increasing perceptions of threat towards immigrants, little has been written on relationships between contact and assessment of immigration policies. This study explores the impact of different forms of contact between the Maltese and the Sub-Saharan African migrants in Malta on perceptions of threat and immigration policies. More specifically, this study asks what are relationships between forms of contact, perceptions of threat, and assessment of migration policies and institutions. The authors posit that perception of threat arrives from different patterns of interaction between the number of immigrants and type of contacts. They also explore the impact of the form of contact and level of threat on general support for migration policies and analyze how different types of threat affect support for particular policies. The study compares the intergroup contact in two localities of Balzan and Marsa that are both home to Open Centers for migrants.

Keywords: *intergroup contact, immigrants, perceptions of threat, assessment of immigration policies*

Impact of contact on prejudice, perception of threat, and assessment of policies

Since Allport first detailed his original “contact hypothesis” in the *Nature of Prejudice*, a wealth of social scientific scholarship has emerged reaffirming the notion that contact between different identity-based groups has the function of reducing prejudice (Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Wagner, Christ,

Pettigrew, Stellmacher & Wolf 2006). The scholarship of many of these authors, which has developed and refined Allport's original work, has transformed the contact hypothesis into a now well-established theory on intergroup contact (Pettigrew 1998, Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Pettigrew et al 2011).

While much has been written regarding the prevalence of xenophobia with the rise of the refugee crisis worldwide, little has been written in relation to contact hypothesis theory and its correlation to changes and debates on immigration policy. Although legislation cannot directly reduce personal prejudice, by controlling the "outward expression of intolerance," it may have a ripple effect onto "inner habits of thought and feeling" (Mitchell 2005; 467-477). A change in social structure may lead to a transformation of a situation, which may in turn lead to a modification in behavior, resulting in a change in attitudes. Thus, the importance of policy must be underlined. Several studies on intergroup relations have pointed out the wider implications of the results on the policies that could be enacted at the site of intergroup clashes to reduce intergroup hostilities (Pettigrew, 1986).

In their more recent study on the contact hypothesis in relation to attitudes toward Latino populations and immigration policy in the United States, Ellison, Heeju, and Leal (2011) disaggregated the concept of friendship into two constituent parts: close friendship and acquaintance. The authors highlight that there is also a proximate association between this friendship and more positive, attitudes toward immigration policy concerning Hispanic communities. Other scholars advanced an argument of complementarity between context and contact: while contextual factors such as "level of immigration to the country" or immigrant group size serves to facilitate a heightened perception of threat, intergroup contact functions to "mediate" these contextual elements by assisting to diminish threat perceptions (Stein, Post, and Rindin 2000 & McLaren 2003). Similarly, the study conducted in New Zealand showed that individual differences in dangerous world beliefs interacted with a proportion of immigrants in the local community resulting in higher levels of prejudice (Sibley, Duckitt, Bergh, Osborne, Perry, Asbrock, Robertson, Armstrong, Wilson, & Barlow 2013). Moreover, McLaren importantly notes that the above examples of environmental factors do not serve to specifically influence "degrees of willingness to expel or include immigrants in society" (2003: 909). Stein, Post, and Rindin further suggest that context and contact variables are interactive, whereby together they both influence attitudes toward immigration

policy options (229). Pertinently, this scholarship is situated closely to emergent work on attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy that focuses on an exploration of the interplay of intergroup threat theory and intergroup contact theory.

In their study on Luxembourg Callen, Meuleman and Valentova (2015) focused on two specific variants: assimilation and multiculturalism, and how attitudinal preferences and support towards these practices shift depending on perception of threat. The authors found that higher perceptions of threat regarding immigrants and immigration more broadly results in diminished support for multiculturalism. This is suggestive of a notion that perceptions of threat (real or imagined) facilitate a reduction in the desire for difference, but not necessarily the “expulsion” of immigrants as noted above by McLaren (2003).

The integrated threat theory (ITT) describes four basic types of threats that can cause prejudice: realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotyping (Stephan, Diaz-Loving, & Duran 2000; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, & Tur Kaspas 1998). Realistic threats include political, economic threats and threats to the physical well-being of the ingroup and its members. Symbolic threats reflect perceived group differences in worldviews, ethics, values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes. Intergroup anxiety arises from negative interaction with outgroup members and fears of being rejected, ashamed, or abused. The negative attitudes toward outgroup members can be connected to different types of threat.

The presents study

Context of research: immigration in Malta

Malta is a small island in the Mediterranean of 316 km² 93 km south of Sicily and 288 km north of Libya with a population of approximately 417, 000 people (NSO 2011). Although the national language in Malta is Maltese, English and Maltese are the official languages used on the island. Roman Catholicism is the official religion in the country. Malta’s strategic position in the Mediterranean between the European and African continents has led it to become the center of both emigration and immigration.

In 2002, Malta started receiving flows of migrants from the Horn of Africa. Malta was not prepared for this flow of immigrants. The Nationalist government deported 220 Eritreans back to their home country, where they were allegedly

tortured (Grech 2014). When Malta became a member state of the European Union on May 1, 2004, it dramatically increased migration flows to Malta (Cassar 2013). Yet, as a result of the Arab Spring of 2011, 'boat arrivals' to Malta further increased (Durick 2012). Moreover, the Labor government came under scrutiny in July 2013 when it threatened to "push-back" migrants to Libya, owing to the increased flow off migrants to Malta and the lack of solidarity from other member states, but this was blocked by the European Court of Human Rights following pressure by local NGOs (EASO Monitor 2014). While the number of boat arrivals reached a peak with 2,008 in 2013, the number has since dropped drastically with 568 (2014), 104 (2015), 25 (2016) and 3 boat arrivals in 2017 (UNHCRd, 2017).

Interviews for this study were conducted between April and June 2014. During that time according to UNHCR, the majority of migrants arriving by boat stemmed from Somalia, Eritrea, Syria, Nigeria and Gambia (respectively), and in 2014 the majority of migrants came from Syria, Somalia, Sudan, Gambia and Eritrea (UNHCRd, 2017). It is worth noting however that from April to June 2014, the majority of migrants stemmed from SSA since the Syrian migrants mainly arrived in Malta in August 2014.

At the time of the interviews, if the migrants arrives without a valid passport or visa (indiscriminately whether they arrive by sea or plane), they were temporarily subject to a Removal Order under the Immigration Act, at least until the launch of an asylum application (UNHCRa 2014), and were detained in one of the detention centers. During their wait for the outcome of the asylum procedure, asylum seekers are confined to one of the three closed detention centers (Majcher & Flynn 2014). If the asylum-seekers received a positive answer that they would be granted a form of protection, they would be released from detention upon receiving the decision. They were then usually taken to one of the open centers available. If asylum-seekers were not granted protection, Malta reserved the right to deport them back to their country, subject to international and European law. Malta returned in total 460 migrants (including both those arriving irregularly by boat and overstayers) in 2013 (UNHCRa 2014). In total "less than 30% of the around 19,000 individuals who arrived by boat since 2002" remained in Malta (UNHCRb 2014).

A new migration strategy has since been introduced in December 2015, whereby newly arrived irregular migrants would be accommodated for a limited duration at an initial reception facility wherein migrants would undergo medical

screening and processing by pertinent authorities including Police officials and the Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS). Thereafter, only those migrants issued with a detention decision would be transferred to a Detention Center. The rest, namely those subsequently released from detention, or those subject to alternatives to detention, would be offered accommodation in an Open Center. While Malta does not yet have an integration policy, the government is planning to launch this policy in 2017.

Studies of contact between the Maltese and Sub-Saharan African migrants in an educational setting found that intergroup contact did not change perceptions vis-à-vis the extent to which migrants should be integrated into the community (Caruana Scicluna 2012). In 2012, a quantitative survey was also conducted by UNHCR on the perceptions Maltese have of migrants (UNHCRc 2012); Clark and Bradford, on the other hand, focused on the perceptions migrants have of the Maltese (Bradford & Clark 2014). The studies highlighted that although the field of contact theory is developing, “Malta lacks research in this area” (Caruana Scicluna 2012). Consequently, this study aims to contribute to fill in such a research gap.

Moreover, studies have so far not seemed to focus on migration within the localities, something that this study seeks to accomplish. The importance of such as study was in fact highlighted by Stephan (2012, 44) who called for research on both immigrants’ and the resident community’s attitudes and needs in order to better streamline and target interventions aimed at improving intergroup relations (Stephan 2012). The chosen localities for this study, both with an open center but that are largely dissimilar are Balzan and Marsa.

Methodology

This study asks *what are the nature and dynamics of the interaction between the Maltese and the Sub-Saharan migrants in the two localities?* More specifically, *how is the form of social contact interconnected with perceptions of threat and assessment of the detention/migration policies and institutions?*

Form of the study

At the time of the interviews, Sub-Saharan African migrants constituted the largest group of migrants that arrive in Malta (UNHCRb 2014). As a consequence, this group of migrants was selected for the case study, in order to get a better understanding of the contact between the Maltese and the largest migrant group

(despite the differences in the countries of origins). The same group was also used by Clark and Bradford's study since as they pointed out quoting the Commissioner for Human Rights, the majority of migrants at the time were migrants aged 20 to 40 stemming from sub-Saharan Africa (Commissioner 2011).

The study was conducted in the form of a comparative case study. The authors decided to focus on two out of nine different open centers. Following a Debate on migration in Malta organized by the European Parliament Information Office in October 2013 that featured representatives of the Marsa and Balzan local councils due to the open centers present in these two localities, as well as two articles comparing the two localities published in the Times of Malta (Martin 2013; Piscopo 2013), the researchers decided to follow-up on these materials and to focus on these open centers for the purpose of this study.

The village of Balzan is located in central Malta and is flanked by Birkirkara, Attard and Lija (Hal Balzan Local Council 2013). According to the last Malta Census (2014), Balzan covers an area of 0.60 km² and has a population of 4, 101 (National Statistics Office Malta 2011). The Balzan Open Center (BOC) knows its start to December 1992, when a Sudanese migrant family came knocking on the door of the Emigrants' Commission, and the Good Shepherd Sisters eventually started opening their doors to migrants.

According to the latest Census (2014), the locality of Marsa covers an area of 2.76 km² and has a population of 4, 788 (National Statistics Office Malta 2011). The Marsa Open Center (MOC) was opened in 2005, in a former trade school on the outskirts of Albert Town, an area already notorious for prostitution. At the time of data collection, the Foundation for Shelter and Support to Migrants (FSM) was "a service-provider" to government for the MOC, while the center was funded and managed by the Ministry for Home Affairs (MHA) through the Agency for Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS)" (Cassar 2013). The MOC has been transferred to the control of AWAS as from October 2015 (AIDA, 2017). Consequently, the Maltese residents living in Balzan had a longer time to adapt to migrants living among them (although their nationalities were not always Sub-Saharan but Iraqi due to the Gulf War amongst others).

The BOC is situated within Balzan close to the village center and the Parish Church, whereas the MOC is more towards the outskirts of Marsa and further away from the Holy Trinity parish (the closest parish of the two in Marsa). Consequently, the BOC is seen to be in the Maltese community, whereas MOC is partly isolated

and partly within the community. Yet the migrants in the BOC are still at a distance from the Maltese, because once they enter the building, there is a long corridor leading to where their actual residential area is located. Moreover, some of the residents of BOC do not go out of the center. On the other hand, not many Maltese are seen to pass by the MOC.

The BOC is home to families, single females and single mothers, as well as single males, with vulnerable individuals given a priority in the selection of residents; while in MOC the population is only male. The population in BOC is also smaller than in the MOC, so the large numbers mentioned earlier do not seem to be a big issue there. The total capacity in the BOC is 172 beds, while the MOC has a total capacity of around 500 beds, although it was not fully occupied at the time of the study. BOC migrants are also seen to have more stability (fixed jobs), whereas some of those from MOC were looking for jobs. Some Maltese people, who require jobs to be done, go specifically to the BOC to ask for workers there. A number of migrants would sit next to the roundabout of Marsa waiting for someone to give them a job.

Method

The method of data collection was semi-structured interviews that were based on 10 questions approved by HSRB. However, as the goal of the interviews was to engage in an open discussion with the migrants, the researchers left the interviews somewhat open regarding what to talk about. Thus, the structure of the interview was similar for each participant with the same 10 questions asked in the preset order. At the same time, the participants were asked additional follow-up questions depending on their specific answers to deeper understand the opinions and positions of each participant. Each interview lasted between a quarter of an hour and ninety minutes. Most interviewees were audio recorded and notes were also taken by the researcher. The time-frame for all the interviews was from April to July 2014.

Sample

The recruitment process was based on the snowballing method with "gatekeepers" represented by members of Local Councils and the staff at the Foundation for Shelter and Support to Migrants (FSM). A snowballing sampling method was used to select both a group of Maltese and a group of migrants from both Marsa and Balzan. In Balzan, the sample was created via the "gatekeepers" -

members of the Balzan Local Council; in Marsa, via "gatekeepers" such as the Marsa Local council and a Parish priest. In total, 38 individuals were interviewed: 10 people each from amongst the migrants in Marsa and Balzan and 10 Maltese from Balzan, and 8 Maltese from Marsa. The permissions to conduct interviews were given by FSM for the Marsa Open Center and Fr. Alfred Vella from the Emigrants' Commission for the Balzan Open Center.

Interview process

Interviews were held according to the preference of the interviewee in order to allow the individual to feel the most comfortable. Interviews with migrants from the Marsa Open Center and the Balzan Open Center were held at the respective centers. Interviews with the Maltese took place in the homes of interviewees, in public places or in shops/ offices.

Interviews were conducted with both Maltese and migrants for three main reasons. Firstly, the authors believe that a more holistic view of the situation can be acquired by asking both parties involved. Secondly, so far, studies on migration in Malta have often focused on one side of the coin, be it the Maltese people's perspectives, by Prof. Vassallo's survey on illegal immigrants, refugees and racism in Malta commissioned by Allied Newspapers Ltd. (Vassallo, 2002), UNHCR Malta (UNHCRc, 2012), Durick (2012) or the University of Malta Students' Council (KSU) survey among University students (Martin, 2014), or the migrants' perspectives, namely the one by Bradford and Clark (2014), and the one by JRS Malta, aditus foundation, and Integra Foundation (2016), "time constraints," (Durick, 2012) being one of the reasons given. Yet it is worth mentioning that in their 2013 study, aditus and UNHCR focused both on the perspective of refugees and those of personnel within the public services in Malta. Thirdly, as the People for Change Foundation noted, "very few efforts were made to describe migration from the migrants' perspective," (The People for Change Foundation, 2010). Pettigrew also argues that perceptions of minorities are generally not much looked into (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

Following the guide to Migration research in Malta, created by the People for Change Foundation, interviews were conducted both in Maltese and in English (the "lingua franca" in the migration sector) (Cassar, 2013). Knowledge of the Maltese language and the local culture was seen as an asset of one of the authors, since it would allow the researcher to get a better grasp of the local context. This would especially be advantageous when it comes to interviews, since Maltese

participants would be able to speak in their mother tongue, in which they may potentially feel more comfortable. In contrast, the fact that migrants could not for the most part speak their native language during the interviews since, no interpreter was available, the migrants may not have been likewise at ease and articulate. Moreover this limited the choice in migrants since only those who could speak English or Maltese were interviewed; these were also more likely to integrate in Malta through knowledge of its official languages.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was used to process quantitative data (Flick 2014). On the first stage, the information was documented in the columns of the respective question that was color-coded according to one of the three main themes: contact, threat, or perception of policies. On the second stage, upon reading the data, themes that kept on recurring, were singled out and subthemes were established during further analysis.

The objectivity of research was ensured by contact comparison of coding process between two researchers, debriefing with the members of Local Councils and the staff at the Foundation for Shelter and Support to Migrants.

Results

Balzan

Contact between Maltese and immigrants

Contact in Balzan was generally perceived to be positive, especially when it involved instances of helping one another. The most contact the Maltese have with migrants was in Balzan itself. In fact, all of the respondents mentioned this form of contact, which takes place mainly in the streets, in a bar, or in a shop. Migrants mostly had contact with Maltese people outside of Balzan. Half of the migrants met the Maltese by coincidence and half met Maltese at work, and two of whom made friends with colleagues and meet them outside of work settings.

The Maltese respondents saw contact with migrants as positive for a number of factors that are split into four groups. Speaking about behavior, respondents mentioned helping each other, kind gestures, and cooperation. Among personal characteristics, respondents mentioned decent education, good manners, and honesty. The theme of assimilation was connected with acceptance of Maltese traditions, learning language, and sharing of similar life experiences.

Interpersonal experiences included friendship and cooperation at workplace.

The factors that contributed to the negative contact between Maltese and migrants in Balzan can be split into two groups: cultural factors that included language problems (since not all of the migrants are able to speak/understand English or Maltese), and behavioral factors. Maltese respondents at times discussed the negative behavior of immigrants, citing harassing women, behaving “as though they own the place,” misbehaving at bars, and fighting. The majority of migrants stated that the contact is mostly good, yet they mentioned several instances of negative contact. Many migrants cited xenophobia, racism and bias of the Maltese.

Perceptions of Threat

The perceptions of threat among Maltese respondents were connected with several factors: economic threats, demographic pressure, behavior of immigrants and knowledge of language. Among migrant respondents, the only source of threat was connected with the knowledge of language.

The half of the Maltese respondents expressed feeling of economic threat. They stressed both the fact that migrants need to have equal social contributions and that migrants were taking the jobs from the Maltese. As one respondent stated, “it is unfair that the Maltese pay the taxes and social contributions, and migrants use the services. Why they are still given benefits if they work?”

Some of the Maltese respondents referred to a threat connected to demographic pressure. Migrants were seen as a threat to Malta being a small country, because Malta does not have the capacity to accommodate all of the migrants since they come in large numbers. A respondent mentioned that some Maltese were afraid that Malta could become a Muslim country. Third, Maltese respondents expressed sources of threat connected with the behavior of immigrants. As one respondent mentioned, “their level of education is not like that of the Maltese; they were not taught to wait in the queue or to say ‘thank you’ like the Maltese.”

Fourth, both Maltese and migrants felt threatened through not knowing each others’ language. Several Maltese reported fear of not understanding the language of migrants, stressing “you feel a bit awkward when migrants speak their own language, and you do not know what their saying.”

Assessment of Policies and Institutions

Majority the Maltese respondents reported that they lacked knowledge on migration policies in Malta. They mentioned that they are not very interested in migration policy, unless it affects them. Assessing policies, Maltese respondents spoke about the link between politics and racism, stressing how some politicians used racism to get power.

Assessing the Balzan Open Center, Maltese respondents positively evaluated control and security of the BOC, namely through surveillance cameras, stressing that BOC helped integration. For example, one respondent highlighted that with the exception of a few, migrants “integrated well,” “they pay their bills, they don’t fight, they don’t cause disturbance.”

Most of the migrants assessed BOC positively because it was clean and staff was very helpful and nice. Some respondents told that they feel positively accepted by the Maltese community. One respondent noted that “if you speak to Maltese and they ask whether from Balzan, they respect you as from there.” They also mentioned the positive acceptance of migrants in Balzan: “people in Balzan have open faces as they respect Sr. Agnes.” The latter is the Good Shepherd’s nun who manages the home.

Marsa

Perception of Contact

All of the Maltese respondents reported meeting migrants in Marsa; they met migrants in the street, in shops in Marsa, in a bar and at their children’s school. All respondents told that no common projects between the Maltese and migrants take place in Marsa because they never had the occasion to and the people never really showed the wish to have them.

When it came to assessing their contact with migrants, majority of Maltese rated the contact as mostly good or positive. The reasons for assessing a contact as positive were divided into three groups: behavior, assimilation, and interpersonal relations. However, the examples were very scarce.

Factors contributing to the perception of contact as negative can be split into three groups: cultural factors, behaviors, and problems of perceptions. Speaking about cultural differences, half of Maltese respondents noted that a number of migrants do not know how to speak English or Italian, which was keeping them at a distance from the Maltese (“language acts as an obstacle”). Among important cultural

characteristics, the respondents mentioned importance of cleanness and told that migrants “trash the community.” Discussing behavior, respondents mentioned a low level of education and absence of manners and five respondents mentioned aggressive behavior and disrespect of women among migrants. Finally, the majority of respondents stressed differences in perceptions. As one respondent mentioned, “they are very limited in what they could offer to the Maltese.”

Migrant respondents described contact with the Maltese as negative. They told that language is a big problem for them because “Maltese generally speak Maltese. They concentrate on speaking Maltese rather than English so it is hard to understand them because of the language difference.” The respondents also mentioned bias and discrimination by Maltese, discussing that some people did not like to sit close to them on the bus, or ignore them.

Perceptions of Threat

The first group of threats stressed by Maltese respondents was connected with interpersonal and intergroup perception. First, Maltese respondents expressed discomfort with different attitudes and cultures. As one respondent stressed, “We feel uncomfortable ... with the attitude of the illegal immigrants that we have in the open center.” Second, the respondents told that they feel threatened to be in the same community with migrants because of their aggressive behavior. Third, the respondents expressed feeling of threat to their country. As one respondent mentioned, “First of all they are going to take one’s country. That is the biggest threat that one could ever have! They invaded us, you know...” Fourth, some respondents feared that Maltese people would mix with other races.

The second group of threats mentioned by Maltese respondents was economic threat. First, the respondents described fears connected to jobs and social benefits. They stressed that some migrants depend on social benefits and do not work. Second, some respondents were afraid that migrants were better off than Maltese, mentioning that they have a lot of money, expensive phones, buy expensive meat, “buy the best clothes, and do not want second-hand clothes.”

Majority of migrant respondents did not consider Maltese people to be a threat. However, some migrant respondents told that they feel threatened because they were not accepted in the Maltese society and their skills were not recognized. As one respondent noted, “I don’t feel comfortable, because society does not recognize me.”

Perceptions of policies

The majority of Maltese respondents told that they were informed on migration policies, some of them spoke to the security officers or listened to debates on T.V. They believed that migrants should be given what they need and sent back: “The EU should take them to its own country!” The majority of Maltese considered detention to be better than a jail sentence, since migrants entered “somebody’s territory illegally.” They also believed that detention centers served as a deterrent, “so that the migrants pass on the message to others not to go Malta.” Some respondents suggested that migrants should be offered educational opportunities of some sort, while remaining under Malta’s control/ custody.

Assessing the open center in Marsa, the majority of Maltese respondents stated that if it is not good for the Maltese, neither is it good for the immigrants. They stressed that the MOC did not have good enough conditions to house people, lacked hygiene, sleeping space, and privacy. All of them mentioned that the government should not keep migrants all in the same place but rather split them among different localities. They did not see it as right for Marsa residents to have a concentration of people in their locality whom they did not know, who had a different culture and particular habits, and to be expected to adapt to it. However, some Maltese respondents saw the MOC as giving migrants an opportunity to stay somewhere until they find a home and believed that the MOC is good for the migrants who do not work, since they do not need to pay for food, water or electricity.

As for the migrants, half of them considered themselves to be uninformed about migration policies, and another half noted that they have little knowledge from their own experience. Several respondents found it positive that the Prime Minister was calling upon fellow EU member states to take some of the migrants since Malta is a small country, and to resettle them in other European countries. All migrant respondents had a positive image of the open center.

Discussion

In sum, the situation of intergroup contact in Balzan and Marsa were seen to differ in a number of ways. Firstly, the BOC was opened a decade earlier than the one in Marsa, giving the Balzan community more of an opportunity to adapt to the situation and trouble-shoot when problems arose. Secondly, while the BOC was

more physically integrated into the community, the MOC was still forming a part of Marsa but was more isolated. Thirdly, the numbers of migrants in the two localities varied, in that a larger numbers of migrants live in the MOC. Additionally, while the MOC was all-male that may be perceived as more threatening, particularly when the migrants moved in groups, the BOC included single males as well as single mothers, single women and families, the latter being seen as “less disruptive.” Moreover, while the BOC residents seem to have entered a daily routine and some of them have a fixed job, many migrants in Marsa were seen looking for jobs, for instance next to the roundabout area, thereby increasing their visibility. As a consequence, since less activity seemed to take place in Balzan in the morning, the residents’ lives’ may potentially be less influenced by the migrants, than was the case in Marsa.

Differences in contact

The research showed that the intergroup contact experience differed in Balzan and in Marsa. Contact in Balzan was generally perceived to be more positive especially when it involved instances of helping one another or participating in common events. The examples of negative contact were usually connected with behavior of some immigrants such as harassment of women, misbehaving at bar, and fighting. Similarly, the majority of migrant respondents described the contact as mostly good, yet they mentioned several instances of negative contact because of xenophobia, racism and bias of the Maltese.

In Marsa on the other hand, respondents described contact as occasional and superficial and told that no common projects between the Maltese and migrants take place. Migrants stressed that work was the only place where they meet people and emphasized negative attitudes to them among Maltese. This situation is echoed by Bradford and Clark’s study (2014, 19). NCPE’s study also confirmed that sub-Saharan African migrants are the group most likely to face housing discrimination. The phrase “Just go back to your country!” has been the case for two notorious instances. The first in 2015 when a Hungarian dark-skinned man was attempting to organize a queue waiting for the bus card, when he was told to go back to his own country, was slapped and spat at (Galea 2017). The second was a migrant woman of African origin was also allegedly told the same phrase when her son took a toy off a Maltese woman’s son (TVM 2016).

In Marsa, respondents seemed to show a certain resistance to migrants in general. Although they described contact with individual migrants with whom they had the opportunity to speak to, as generally good and pleasant, they stressed that they are trying to avoid them as much as possible rather than to establish contact. Numerous studies have found that avoidance of intergroup interaction is the most common reaction to anxiety experienced when coming into contact with outgroup members (Stephan & Stephan 1998). Additionally in Marsa, where there is a larger number of migrants, the Maltese emphasized negative impact of co-existence on their lives.

Thus, similar to Pettigrew's findings, our study showed that friendship and cooperation were the strong factors that reduce prejudice. The study revealed that cooperation affected the level of generalization in perception of the outgroup. In Balzan, the Maltese respondents did not say that all migrants have a habit of becoming drunk, and the migrants did not say that all the Maltese discriminate against them. However, more generalizations were found in Marsa, where Maltese usually used phrases like "all of them" and migrants were describing the Maltese in generalized terms. Bradford and Clark (2014, 21) also quoted a migrant saying "You cannot make friends with people if you do not see them." Consequently, lack of contact between the Maltese and Sub-Saharan African migrants did not augur for the occurrence of positive relations between the two. More time spent with outgroup members led to an increased ability to speak about their individual characteristics and behaviors. Triandis & Vassilou (1972) also mention how in coming into contact with outgroup members' one's view about them become more complex and articulate.

Perception of threat

The respondents from Balzan considered themselves to feel less threat from the migrants there than if they had to go to Marsa. Describing the feeling of threat, Maltese in Balzan concentrated on economic threats, stressing both the fact that migrants need to have equal social contributions and that migrants are taking the jobs from the Maltese. In Marsa, majority of described threats were connected with discomfort with different attitudes and cultures as well as migrants' aggressive behavior. While demographic pressure as a threat was mentioned in both localities, respondents in Marsa put more emphasis on the danger to the country's culture and on the fear that Maltese people would mix with other races. On his part,

Williams argues that larger numbers of an outgroup and their fast influx into a region, may further swell their visibility; thereby increasing the perception of threat as well (Williams 1979). In fact, Stephan & Stephan (1985, 159) found that ingroup members may fear that the outgroup members “will take advantage of, exploit or dominate them.” Stephan and Stephan (1985) also found that language problems contributed to issues between immigrants and the resident community in their study on intergroup anxiety. Interviewees in our study also referred to this so-called ‘language-problem.’

The current study supported and expanded these findings. First, the study showed that the form of contact defined the specific threat perceived by the community members: the more contact and shared workplace increased the perception of economic threats as a part of competition, while occasional contact created the strong feeling of demographic threat and pressure. Second, the number of the outgroup members concentrated in particular locality had a strong connection with the perception of threat. The large number of migrants that live in the MOC and spend time in the center of Marsa, particularly in the evening, was seen as a threat by the Maltese respondents. In contrast, the number of the migrant resident in BOC was smaller that reduced the feeling of demographic threat. Third, the high concentration of migrants in particular localities could increase their in-group support, feeling of self-efficacy and self-esteem that could result in the feeling of confidence relative to the outgroup. This feeling of confidence could contribute to the increased perception of threat among local population. Thus, Maltese from Marsa mentioned that they felt in a minority in their own locality due to an “over-confidence” attitude amongst the migrants, who gave an impression that they owned the place.

Thus, in contrast to studies that describe intergroup contact as a mediator between immigrant group size and threat perceptions (Stein, Post, and Rindin 2000 & McLaren 2003), this study emphasizes that perception of threat arrives from different patterns of interaction between the number of immigrants and type of contacts. While in Balzan interpersonal contact and shared workplace has contributed to the perception of economic threats among some locals, the small number of immigrants mitigated these fears. In Marsa, occasional contact with the larger number of immigrants contributed to the stronger feeling of demographic threat.

Perception of policies

While Maltese respondents in both Balzan and in Marsa reported a general lack of knowledge on detention and migration policies, Maltese respondents in Marsa believed that they had more knowledge about policies and in fact were more critical about their implementation. The respondents from Marsa were generally against bringing migrants to Malta, stressing that that Malta's policy has to help migrants in their own countries and to prevent them from coming to Malta. They also believed that migrants should be provided with help and sent back to their countries. Nonetheless, the exisistence of several misconceptions surrounding migration in Malta, has brought into question the extent to which the knowledge was factual or influenced by the perceptions of threat.

Thus, similarly to the research on the impact of perception of threat on the support of assimilation and multiculturalism (Callen, Meuleman and Valentova 2015), this study shows that increased perception of threat contributes to stronger support of particular policies. The absence of friendship and cooperation and sporadic contact leads to the perception of increased threats and thus to the amplified interest in immigration policies. Maltese respondents in Marsa were more informed about policies and had stronger opinions about their failure. Thus, they felt more need to be empowered in addressing the problems in their community caused by the open center for immigrants.

In addition, this study advances understanding of the impact of perception of threat on assessment of policies by analyzing how different types of threat affect support for particular policies. In Balzan, with the low level of perception of economic threat, Maltese assess the open center positively and support the idea of integration of immigrants into local communities. They however, stressed that migrant should pay their bills and equally contribute to community. In Marsa, with the high level of demographic threat, Maltese assess the open center negatively, demanding its demolition or decreasing in size. This perception of demographic threat had led them to supporting exclusive rather than inclusive policies and actions.

Conclusion

The study validates some research on intergroup contact and perception of threat as well as contributes to more nuanced understandings of interaction

between contact and threat and their impact on the assessment of immigration policies. The study confirms that more interpersonal interaction and cooperation leads to positive contact, while occasional and superficial interaction leads negative view on the contact. The study emphasizes that the latter also results in the higher level of generalization, as well as negative attitudes and discriminative behaviors toward migrants.

The study also shows the impact of the form of contact and number of immigrants on the perception of threat. The type of perceived threat depends on the form of contact with shared workplace leading to the perception of economic threats and occasional contact leading to the feeling of demographic threat. The number of the outgroup members impacts the perception of threat in two ways. First, higher concentration of migrants is seen by the local people as a direct threat to culture and security. Second, higher concentrations of migrants contribute to their feeling of confidence through in-group support, feeling of self-efficacy and self-esteem that in turn, is perceived as a threat by the local people.

However, the study emphasizes that the analysis of the form of contact and number of immigrants alone could not fully explain the differences in the perception of threat. Rather, the type of threat arrives from the interaction of these two factors. The study reveals two patterns: (1) smaller number of migrants with positive interpersonal contact resulting in lower level of perception of economic threat and (2) higher number of migrant with occasional contact resulting in higher level of perception of demographic threat. More studies are needed to analyze different patterns of the interaction between number of migrants and form of contact.

This study confirms previous findings that increased perception of threat contributes to stronger support of particular policies. It also advances understanding of the connections between perception of contact, threat, and assessment of policies. Thus, it shows that the increased perception of threats leads to the amplified interest in immigration policies. People who feel higher threat from migrants believe to have more knowledge and have stronger opinions about these policies. The study also reveals that different types of threats affect support for particular policies. The perception of economic threat is connected to the general support of integration (with the requirement of the equal contribution to economy and society), while perceptions of demographic threat leads to the support of exclusive policies and actions that limits immigration. Further research is

needed to explore the impact of the form of contact and perception of threat on the support of specific immigration policies.

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