



PRESS RELEASE

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Empathy exacerbates discussions about immigration

If both camps take a more empathetic approach when there's an argument, it generally makes it easier to listen to what the other side is saying and alleviate tension. This isn't the case, however, when the conflict is about immigration.

Discussions about immigration are heated, even antagonistic. But what happens when supporters and opponents undertake to show more empathy and engage in perspective taking, two types of behaviour that can ease tension? A study carried out at the University of Geneva (UNIGE) — published in the journal *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*— reveals that people who support immigration are ready and willing to adopt an empathetic approach and a wider perspective. By contrast, when opponents of immigration are asked to engage in perspective taking, they feel more competition with their “adversary.” Although empathy is not the universal key to unlocking healthy, constructive dialogue around immigration, the UNIGE study does show that it is important to take the political leaning and opinions of individuals into account in order to intervene effectively in conflict resolution.

Arguments over immigration have been in the public eye following recent debates about the initiative to limit the influx of political refugees into Europe or the Black Lives Matter movement. UNIGE psychologist and neuroscientist Olga Klimecki and her colleagues have been trying to ascertain whether empathy-based interventions, which are known to help to resolve certain disputes, could help bring people together and ease tensions.

A showdown between left and right

Previous research has shown marked differences between people who lean towards the right politically and those on the left regarding their willingness to engage in empathy. The Geneva scientists incorporated this factor into their methodology, with Professor Klimecki explaining: “We formed pairs made up of a supporter and opponent of immigration, without telling them about the political orientation of the other member of the duo. The pairs,” continues Klimecki, “had to work together to solve ten immigration-related issues.” The ten problems included questions such as “When and how should immigrants be naturalised?” and: “How should benefits intended for migrants be distributed?”

Experimenting with empathy

The psychologists formed three groups made up of several pairs, who were issued with three different instructions for solving the task they had been asked to perform. The first group was not given any instructions, and served as a control group; the second group had to try to



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Olga Klimecki: «People who lean towards the right politically are less willing to adopt empathetic behaviour, and are less open to trying out new things. This needs to be taken into account if we intend to resolve conflicts and make the debate around immigration more constructive.»

empathise with each other; and participants in the third group were to attempt to take a wider perspective by considering the other position, thoughts and ideas.

The results of the study showed that people who are pro-immigration are motivated to show empathy towards their opponents. People who are against immigration, by contrast, are not at all inclined to engage in empathy or perspective taking. In addition, when asked to step back and look at the situation from a broader perspective, they have an increased sense of competition. “Competition is generally not a good sign of collaboration. For us psychologists, it is an indicator of a deterioration in social relations”.

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Finding a way out of the crisis

It follows that empathy and a wider perspective are not ideal techniques for resolving conflicts on the topic of immigration. “Previous research has shown that people who lean towards the right politically are less willing to adopt empathetic behaviour, and are less open to trying out new things. This needs to be taken into account if we intend to resolve conflicts and make the debate around immigration more constructive,” continues Professor Klimecki.

The researcher puts forward potential solutions borrowed from other studies to govern emotions in an indirect and more astute manner. “Our study suggests that giving explicit instructions for empathy or perspective taking is not optimal when targeting people of different political opinions. Reading texts or watching films containing positive messages and hopeful scenes, where the topic is not related to the conflict, helps to calm spirits. This needs to be tested in the context of immigration disputes. Finally, we would like to test our empathy-based conflict approach in other cultures and other geopolitical situations.”

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