
Effects of the Refugee Crisis on Perceptions of Asylum Seekers in Recipient Populations

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This article examines the effects of the refugee crisis on perceptions of asylum seekers. Previous research has demonstrated that asylum seekers are perceived in terms of deservingness—either as deserving refugees in need of help or as undeserving and unwelcome exploiters. The article uses unique panel data from a representative sample drawn directly from the Norwegian population registry. Through Structural Topic Modelling (STM) of open-ended survey responses fielded before and after the refugee crisis, this article analyses, first, how ordinary citizens perceive asylum seekers and, second, the article documents that these perceptions of asylum seekers changed. They did, however, not change from perceiving asylum seekers as deserving to perceiving them as undeserving. The change was more subtle. Responses that characterize asylum seekers as deserving prior to the crisis tended to reflect a sense of responsibility to help—of involvement. Responses after the crisis were more distanced, even as they characterized the asylum seekers as deserving. All in all, these findings improve our knowledge about how the refugee crisis affected public opinion in recipient populations.

Keywords: Asylum seekers, open-ended responses, refugee crisis, public opinion, perceptions

Introduction

In the eyes of authority, an asylum seeker is an individual applying for sanctuary in a country other than his/her native land. S/he is a migrant in transit searching for a better life, where motives and experiences have to be examined to determine whether the individual meets the criteria to be recognized as a refugee (Whittaker 2006: 7). But what is an asylum seeker in the eyes of ordinary citizens, and how has this changed in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis?

Previous studies have shown that attitudes towards immigrants and asylum seekers, as well as thoughts about their deservingness, depend on what they think about their characteristics, such as race, background or religion (Hainmuller and Hiscox 2010; Bansak *et al.* 2016). A limited number of studies have used open-ended responses to analyse perceptions of out-groups (Blinder 2015). Lippmann's (1997 [1922]) classic conception of public opinion states that people's attitudes are related to the 'pictures in our heads'. The ideal way to capture the content of these 'pictures', is by asking open-ended questions.

Such questions, where the respondents were free to express their thoughts and opinions using their own words, are used in this study. The open-ended question was posed at two different time points, before and after the refugee crisis. The first wave of data was collected in October of 2014, prior to the refugee crisis and the heated debate concerning asylum seekers and refugees. The second wave was collected in March of 2016, immediately following the arrival of more than 30,000 asylum seekers and the intense political debate and media attention that ensued. This study documents the ensuing change in perceptions with asylum seekers.

By asking a representative sample to explain, using their own words, what they thought about asylum seekers, we gained a unique insight into the perceptions of asylum seekers and the change in these. This article asks two questions—first, how do people perceive asylum seekers? What do ordinary citizens in recipient countries emphasize when asked to explain their views of asylum seekers? Second, how do their perceptions after the refugee crisis compare to those they had before?

How Do People Perceive Asylum Seekers?

According to a common social psychological model of inter-group relations, it is common to ask oneself two basic questions when meeting someone for the first time. First, what are their intentions? Do they wish me well, are they friendly or are they threatening? Second, what is their status? Are they competent, rich, poor? These two sets of questions constitute the dimensions of warmth and competence and sketch the basic map of the stereotype content model (SCM) (Fiske *et al.* 2002). An important aspect of the SCM framework is that it is closely connected to prejudice and deservingness. Who is a deserving refugee? Who should be accepted and who should not?

Van Oorschot (2006) shows that, across Europe, there are large discrepancies regarding the perceived deservingness of different groups. While elderly people are seen as the most deserving, immigrant groups are found to be the least deserving. Muus (1997) argues that there is a contradictory idea in asylum policy approaches—humanitarian (protection of refugees in need) yet restrictive (reducing migration flows through restrictive policies, etc.). The Norwegian government has itself argued that it practices a 'strict but fair' immigration policy (Pressemelding 2016) and Sales (2002) argues that

asylum seekers are increasingly portrayed as ‘undeserving’, in contrast to the ‘deserving’ refugee category. Van Oorschot (2000) lists five criteria of deservingness in relation to groups, the first of which is control—are people in need themselves responsible for their situation? Groups that are regarded as responsible for their needy situation are viewed as less deserving. The second criterion is the level of need. People in greater need are seen as more deserving. The third criterion is group identity. Groups whose identities are closer to our own are seen as more deserving. The fourth criterion is group attitudes. People who are more likable and grateful are seen as more deserving. Finally, the fifth criterion concerns reciprocity. Individuals and groups who have made contributions to the in-group or may be expected to contribute in the future are viewed as more deserving.

A major study by Bansak *et al.* (2016) reveals large differences between acceptable and unacceptable asylum seekers. Asylum seekers who are more likely to get a job, have more consistent testimonies, suffer from vulnerabilities and who are Christians, rather than Muslims, are regarded as more acceptable. These findings underscore the importance of taking into account differences in asylum-seeker categories. Ford (2011) argues that it is important to distinguish between different migrant groups in survey research because ‘we do not know what kind of immigrants respondents had in mind when they responded to the survey’ (Ford 2011: 1018). This point has been emphasized by Verkuyten (2004), who found that the way in which asylum seekers are portrayed (political refugees versus economic refugees) impacts the support for immigration policies as well as sentiments towards asylum seekers. Sniderman *et al.* (2004) have shown that hostility towards immigrants increases if they are portrayed in cultural rather than economic terms.

Bowes *et al.* (2009: 25) argue that media and political stereotypes portray asylum seekers as ‘burdensome competitors for economic benefit of some sort or another’. More recent studies have demonstrated that events covered heavily by the media, such as the picture of Aylan Kurdi, has contributed to mood changes among European recipient populations (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi 2017). Kirkwood (2017) has argued that the ongoing refugee crisis, which resulted in heightened political debate in 2015, led to the humanization of refugees, with politicians initiating a dialogue about ‘human beings’. In an earlier study, Grillo (2005) found that, in Britain, arguments in favour of asylum seekers portrayed them as more deserving and emphasized their humanity, vulnerability and need for help. Kirkwood (2017) maintains that there was a noticeable increase in the humanization of refugees in Britain during the refugee crisis.

Reactions to Threats

It is well documented that perceived threats can lead to increases in exclusionary attitudes (e.g. Huddy *et al.* 2002; Albertson and Gadarian 2015). According to inter-group threat theory, perceived threats can be either

realistic or symbolic. Realistic threats involve concerns about potentially negative outcomes for the in-group, such as those concerning the economy, health, politics, safety and wellbeing. A realistic threat can arise when two groups are competing for the same goal, especially when one group has more financial muscle than the other. Conversely, symbolic threats involve concerns about potential threats to the values, norms or other characteristics of the in-group. Symbolic threats do not involve tangible threats in the same way as realistic threats. Rather, such threats arise because the in-group believes in its moral rightness (Oskamp 2000). Stephan and Stephan (2000) argue that, when such threats exist, they can lead to negative reactions in the form of negative attitudes, negative verbal and non-verbal behaviour, as well as hostile behaviour. Ivarsflaten (2005: 42) has demonstrated that public opposition to immigration is particularly strong among those who feel that minorities represent a threat to their culture.

A large body of literature has investigated the relationship between perceived threats and authoritarian attitudes. For many researchers, perceived threats increase prejudice and opposition to immigration (Stephan *et al.* 1999; Huddy *et al.* 2002; Albertson and Gadarian 2015). One classic example is Sales (1972, 1973), who found that authoritarian indicators were higher during periods of presumed societal threat (e.g. the Depression era) than in periods without such presumed threats. Feldman and Stenner (1997) further emphasize the importance of distinguishing between long-term societal threats and short-term threatening events. They argue that it is the long-term and deeply felt threats that contribute to the development of authoritarian attitudes (Feldman and Stenner 1997: 744). Their study found evidence of an interaction effect between authoritarian predispositions and perceived threats. They found that greater perceptions of threat were associated with more exclusionary attitudes, but only for those scoring high on authoritarianism (Feldman and Stenner 1997: 761). Hetherington and Suhay (2011) observe a contradictory finding, namely that voters who are less authoritarian adopt a more exclusionary policy stance based on the terrorist threat. Their findings suggest that perceived threats can lead many ordinary citizens to adopt more authoritarian values.

The 2015 refugee crisis and influx of asylum seekers put the issue of immigration at the top of the Norwegian political agenda. Several studies demonstrate that sudden influxes of asylum seekers as well as intense political and media attention lead to an increase in exclusionary attitudes towards immigration (Hopkins 2010; Weber 2015; Kaufmann 2017). In this article, I regard change in a more in-depth manner. What do ordinary citizens in recipient countries emphasize when asked about asylum seekers after the refugee crisis? How do their perceptions after the crisis compare to those they had before?

Norway in the 2015 European Refugee Crisis

In 2015, more than 1 million asylum seekers crossed the Mediterranean into Europe, and more than 30,000 made it into Norway. This was mainly a

consequence of the refugee crisis and the Syrian civil war. In Europe, Norway was listed as the fourth nation of a list of receiving countries with the highest number of asylum applicants in relation to the number of inhabitants (Pew Research Center 2016). The refugee crisis resulted in intense political debate and media attention. In Norway, there were two important legislative decisions in response to the refugee crisis. In June 2015, there was broad legislative agreement to take in a quota of 8,000 Syrian refugees. All parties, except the Progress Party and the Socialist Left Party, voted in favour of the agreement. This decision reflects a more humanitarian perspective and a willingness to help refugees.

In September 2015, the news of the first asylum seekers entering Norwegian borders was broadcast. At first, only a few people arrived but, a few weeks later, hundreds of asylum seekers were entering Norwegian borders on a daily basis. During the autumn of 2015, 5,500 asylum seekers arrived from Russia through the northern borders of Norway (Storskog), of which 42 different nationalities were represented (Matre and Johnsen 2016). These events led to the second important legislative decision, which concerned an agreement to decrease the number of asylum applicants arriving in Norway. This was a direct consequence of the influx of asylum seekers entering from the northern Norwegian borders at Storskog. The agreement contains 18 actions aimed at preventing asylum seekers from coming to Norway. These actions include the speedier return of asylum seekers; decreasing the number of benefits, making Norway less financially attractive; stricter demands on asylum seekers; increased international cooperation; and stricter rules regarding family reunification (Pressemelding 2016). All parties in the legislature, except the Socialist left and the Greens, supported the agreement.

The two agreements of the Norwegian parliament emphasize very different aspects of the asylum debate. The first emphasizes Norway's responsibility to help the refugees, while the other focuses on decreasing the number of asylum applicants and the financial aspect of asylum seekers. Both perspectives received media attention. Although there was broad agreement on both deals, there were also stark differences. The first deal showed a willingness to help, while the second showed the opposite. As argued by Muus (1997), these are contradictory approaches to the politics of asylum. During the refugee crisis, the prime minister appointed the controversial politician Sylvi Listhaug (Progress Party (FrP)) as minister of the newly established post of integration and immigration. This marked the first time that the entire policy area of immigration was centralized under one minister (Brekke and Staver 2018: 8).

It is reasonable to assume that the media have functioned as the citizens' primary channels of information concerning the refugee crisis; therefore, the framing of the event is important. The media tend to favour negativity in news coverage, which may have been reflected throughout the refugee crisis (Baum and Groeling 2010). Using an automated frame analysis, Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) show that the frames employed by the media

focused more on administrative, security and economic issues, while humanitarian issues were used to a lesser extent. However, in their study of a selection of local media news sources, Hognestad and Lamark (2017) show that the humanitarian perspective was the most prominent in Norwegian local news. Further, Hovden *et al.* (2018) show that the media in Norway first portrayed the refugee crisis from a humanitarian perspective, and later switched to a more critical and economic framing of the crisis. They found that, as in the rest of Europe, the Scandinavian press, in general, appears to have embraced a more humanitarian perspective at the start of the refugee crisis, which grew progressively weaker at the end of the crisis. Considering that people tend to prefer negative to positive news (Soroka 2014), and because the negative perspective from the news media was more prominent at the end of the refugee crisis, it is reasonable to conjecture that this perspective will dominate among ordinary citizens, in relation too. The analysis that follows will reveal whether these perspectives were emphasized by the respondents in their conversations about asylum seekers.

Data

The collection and analysis of open-ended data are relatively rare in the social sciences, and almost exclusively done through human coding (Roberts *et al.* 2014b). There has been debate concerning the accuracy of the information obtained through such open-ended responses. However, in an early study, Geer (1991) found that open-ended questions can be useful in studies of public opinion. In an experimental study on such open-ended responses, Smyth *et al.* (2009: 336) stated that ‘open-ended questions may reemerge in web self-administered surveys as an effective format for collecting thick, rich, descriptive information from respondents’. The cost of collecting such data has decreased rapidly, as it became possible to implement open-ended questions in web surveys. This article uses open-ended data from the Norwegian citizen panel (NCP) collected in October 2014 and March 2016 (Ivarsflaten *et al.* 2014, 2016). The NCP is a nationally representative panel of 6,000 adults over the age of 18. It is based on a probability sample of the Norwegian population and is drawn directly from the Norwegian National Registry (Skjervheim and Høgestøl 2014). At the time of this study’s data collection, the respondents answered an online questionnaire of around 20 minutes twice a year. The data for this article are based on an open-ended question about asylum seekers. The respondents were asked: ‘What comes to mind when you read or hear the words “asylum seeker”?’ An open text box was displayed in which the respondents could freely express their thoughts.

In the first wave of data collection, a smaller sub-sample of respondents ($N=494$) were asked about their perceptions regarding asylum seekers, while, in the second wave, a larger sub-sample ($N=1,126$) were asked the same question. In Wave 1, the mean response included 14.5 words. The shortest response included only one word, while the longest response included 115

words. In the second wave, the mean response included 16.6 words. The shortest response included only one word, while the longest response included 175 words.¹ The total number of words for the entire corpus was 22,841. Of these, the most frequently occurring words were ‘individual’ (252), ‘war’ (198), ‘need’ (195) and ‘human being’ (164). Due to the listwise deletion of missing values of any of the covariate variables, the sample size was reduced from 1,620 to 1,272. The covariate variables used in the estimation were: wave of data collection, attitudes towards immigration, motivation to control prejudice, immigration politics important (salience), vote, age, education and gender.

Methods and Analysis

To conduct the analyses, the article used a semi-automated quantitative text-analysis technique called the structural topic model (STM) (Roberts *et al.* 2014b). STM is a semi-automated approach using machine-assisted reading of large text material. The model enables the discovery of topics from the data instead of relying on human coding. In this way, there is no bias from human coding. The STM unveils topics from the text corpus by searching for distinct topics from the data. It also permits users to incorporate metadata, defined as information about each document, into the topic model. The goal of the topic model is to allow researchers to discover topics and estimate their relationship with document metadata (in survey data, such metadata can be information about gender, age, political attitudes, etc.). Model outputs can be used to conduct hypothesis testing about these relationships (Roberts *et al.* 2014a).

A topic in the STM is defined as a mixture of words whereby each word has a probability of belonging to a topic. The method is based on mixed-membership—that is, respondents are not placed only in one topic, but in all topics. This is an important aspect of the method. For a model with three topics, each respondent will get three numbers with a sum of 100. For example, one respondent can be placed 70 per cent in ‘Topic 1’, 20 per cent in ‘Topic 2’ and 10 per cent in ‘Topic 3’. This makes ambivalent responses more meaningful and easier to interpret. STM can be used to analyse the content of large text materials such as blogs, policy reports and survey data.

The first part of the text-analysis process consisted of data preparation. This part involved, first, reading through all the material and anonymizing the responses containing personal and/or identifiable information. Second, a correction of spelling mistakes was performed to ensure that words, such as ‘refugee’, were read as the same word. Third, Norwegian stop-words were omitted. This includes words that semantically have no meaning and contain words like ‘it, and, or’. A list of the Norwegian stop-words is included in the package SnowballC. Finally, the SnowballC package was used to perform stemming.

The second part of the text-analysis process consisted of running the STM. This process was done by running the STM with topics ranging from 2–12 and 20 STM runs for each topic. The four best runs for each topic were automatically selected. This produced a total of 44 runs, which were then read and evaluated qualitatively by the author. The selected run contained three topics and was evaluated to best represent the text material. This represents three main narratives of how people perceive asylum seekers. A disadvantage of using a model with a low number of topics is that nuances can be lost (Tvinnereim *et al.* 2017: 36). However, the chosen three-topic model was evaluated to best represent the data. Runs with more than three topics tended to separate topics that clearly belonged together. It might be fruitful to consider a model with more topics, in addition to the three-topic model, so as to gain more nuances. The author considered a model with five topics that scored higher on exclusivity, but lower on semantic coherence, than the three-topic model. It also provided the same results. More information as well as results from the alternative model with five topics is included in the supplementary information. The three-topic model will also be validated on established measures later in this article.

Table 1 includes the topic number, suggested topic label and most representative words for each topic. The three topics that were evaluated to represent the best fit to the data material were labelled ‘Undeserving’, ‘Deserving/Involved’ and ‘Deserving/Distanced’. Together, the three topics constituted a broad picture of how ordinary citizens perceive asylum seekers. The sections below describe the topics and present some of the most representative responses for each topic.

Topic 1: Undeserving

The main narrative for the first topic was a categorical view of asylum seekers as undeserving. The respondents saw asylum seekers as people who come to Norway to take advantage of the system, as criminals, people who are financial burdens on Norwegian society, fortune hunters, people who have deserted their country, people who are Muslim, people who should be returned to their countries. The respondents associated asylum seekers with people who take advantage of the Norwegian welfare system, people who constitute a cultural threat. Respondents emphasized both financial and cultural aspects that, in their view, were under attack. In considering van Oorschot’s (2000) five criteria of deservingness, it is interesting that none of the perspectives held forth considered the situation of asylum seekers or their level of need (Criteria One and Two). Instead, they were seen as responsible for their own situation. Criterion Five concerning reciprocity seemed to be the most relevant for this topic. In this perspective, individuals or groups that might be expected to contribute to the in-group were seen as more deserving. Most of the responses associated with this topic emphasized the consequences of taking in asylum seekers, such as the focus

Table 1

A Model with Three Topics

Topic number	Topic label	Most important words
1	Undeserving	Norway, think, come, other, asylum seeker, refugee, Norwegian, much, get, immigrant
2	Deserving/Involved	Need, human being, help, protection, distress, escape, needs, poverty, flee
3	Deserving/Distanced	Individual, country, search, life, home country, escape, because, political, other, own

Note: Translated from Norwegian. Original Norwegian wording can be found in the supplementary information.

on crime, 'Islamization' and threats to Norwegian culture, and exploitation of the generous Norwegian welfare system and the perceived financial costs. In total, the responses from Topic 1 represent a broad perspective of more critical views of asylum seekers as undeserving. Below is a selection based on the most representative responses:

1. Big financial expenses for the Norwegian government. Serious crime, bad attitudes, rape, religious fanaticism, destruction of Norwegian culture and Islamization of Norway.
2. Foreigners. We have way too many that are criminal.
3. Destruction of our country and society as we know it.
4. (...) It's a disgrace that many of them get more benefits than Norwegians that have worked, paid taxes and ended up in disability.
5. A person that comes to take advantage of our very good welfare benefits.
6. All these men in the prime of life that come into the country, should stay at home and fight for their children and their native country. Why should we send our kids to these wars when they themselves escape. Children and their mothers we should protect, not these adult minors that come to live on benefits.

Topic 2: Deserving/Involved

The main narrative for this topic concerned the view of asylum seekers as human beings in need of help, human beings in a difficult situation who need help and safety, human beings who need our help and our obligation to help them. Based on van Oorschot's (2000) criteria of deservingness, the responses in this topic emphasized the first criterion, in particular, the level of need. This topic demonstrates an involved and humanizing view of the asylum category and explicitly emphasizes the obligation to help. In many ways, Topic 2 can be seen as antithetical to the narrative of 'undeserving'. Of the

three topics, Topic 2 most clearly views asylum seekers as deserving. Although the responses were short, they represented an involved view and a willingness to help. For example, the respondents emphasized that asylum seekers are human beings, that they needed help and that we needed to help them.

Several respondents also emphasized the situations that asylum seekers flee from and mentioned examples such as ‘war’, ‘poverty’, ‘torture’, ‘bombing’, ‘persecution’ and ‘distress’. Kirkwood (2017) argues that the ongoing refugee crisis, by engendering a huge political debate in 2015, led to the humanization of refugees whereby politicians started talking about ‘human beings’. The humanization of refugees and asylum seekers is explicitly recognized by categorizing them as ‘human beings’, but also by highlighting their vulnerability, such as that they have children, are elderly, disabled and need help (Lynn and Lea 2003). One can argue that the responses represented in this topic humanize refugees.

A selection based on the most representative responses is:

1. We need to help, they are human beings in horrible life situations that flee from war and hopelessness.
2. Human beings that need protection and are in distress, that we need to help.
3. A human being that needs protection.
4. Human beings that need help.
5. Human beings that flee from war and destruction.
6. Human beings that flee from war. Poverty. Need help.

Topic 3: Deserving/Distanced

The main narrative presented in this topic was the view of asylum seekers as individuals who flee from war and other difficult situations, individuals who are persecuted in their home countries because of sexual orientation or political views and individuals who need to escape from poverty and difficult conditions. Similar to Topic 2, this topic also acknowledged asylum seekers’ need for asylum, but not their need for help or the obligation to help. Thus, it was more distanced than the topic ‘Deserving/Involved’. Topics 2 and 3 both responded to the deservingness perspective, albeit in different ways. Answers in both topics described asylum seekers as people who are in difficult situations, who have to flee from war, who are being persecuted because of various reasons and who seek a better future. The responses associated with this topic fit well with van Oorschot’s (2000) second deservingness criterion concerning the situations of asylum seekers. Individuals who are seen as not responsible for their own situation are viewed as more deserving. Some of the examples mentioned included ‘religious’, ‘political’, ‘ethnic’, ‘danger’, ‘war’, ‘catastrophes’, ‘lack of food’, ‘poverty’ and ‘wrong political opinions’. The responses included examples such as fleeing from war, dangerous

circumstances, persecution because of religion, ethnicity, political or sexual orientation.

The responses associated with this topic elaborated quite extensively what it means to be an asylum seeker. Of the three topics, this topic contained the most text, and therefore it was also the richest. Similarly, the responses under the topic 'Involved' acknowledged and affirmed asylum seekers' genuine need for asylum. Unlike the first topic, these responses did not reject asylum seekers or view them as undeserving. For instance, von Hermanni and Naumann (2018) found that fleeing from war or political persecution is seen as a justified reason for seeking asylum in Germany—a perspective that was extensively highlighted under this topic. However, although the answers were reflective and rich, they were also more neutral and distanced compared to those of the second topic, 'Deserving/Involved'. This topic did not necessarily represent a positive view of asylum seekers, but rather a more reflective one.

A selection based on the most representative responses is:

1. An individual that seeks refuge in another country because it is dangerous for the individual to stay in the home country because of religion, political work, sexual orientation etc.

2. An individual that has fled from their own country because of a completely unbearable, life threatening situation in their home country either because the person belongs to a generally persecuted population or because of a more specific individual opposition against the authorities/regime/power groups in the country.

3. An individual that seeks residence in another country based on the conditions in the home country being unstable, dangerous or personally dangerous for the individual to return to. The individual can be personally persecuted by a group or the state in the home country.

4. That they are people that have left difficult situations in the home country and that seek security in another country.

5. One that has had to leave their home country due to danger for their lives, either because of general war actions or because he/she is politically persecuted.

Topic Validation

To establish that the topics chosen for analysis measured public opinion regarding asylum seekers, I plotted the topic proportions on two established measures: the respondents' views about immigration² and the respondents' internal motivation to control prejudice (Blinder *et al.* 2013). The results are presented in Figure 1.

The topic 'Undeserving' was clearly connected to more exclusionary views of immigration. The more people believed that it serves as a disadvantage when immigrants settle in Norway, the more they talked about asylum

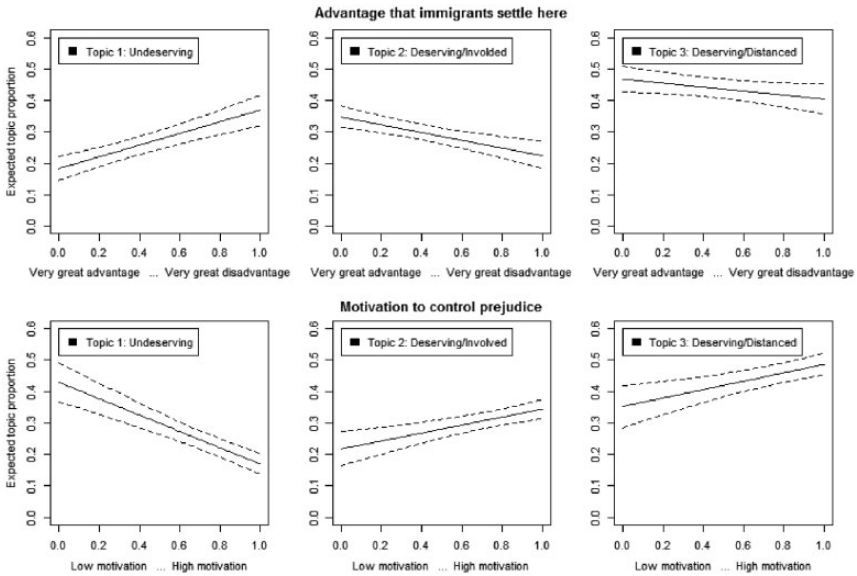


Figure 1
Validation Plots

seekers as ‘Undeserving’. This was also the case for the respondents’ internal motivation to control prejudice (IMCP). Low IMCP is highly associated with emphasizing responses connected to the ‘Undeserving’ topic. The lower the IMCP, the more they talked about asylum seekers as ‘Undeserving’. This fits well with the terms that the respondents emphasized under the ‘Undeserving’ narrative (e.g. exploiters, undeserving, criminals, cultural threat).

Topic 2, ‘Deserving/Involved’, was in diametric opposition to Topic 1. The more the respondents thought that immigration was an advantage to Norway, and the higher the motivation to control prejudice, the more they reasoned using the ‘Deserving/Involved’ frame. This fits the humanization perspective emphasized by the respondents—that asylum seekers are human beings who need help and that we have an obligation to help them. The respondents who scored highly on this topic had more positive views on immigration and were more motivated to control prejudice.

The final topic, ‘Deserving/Distanced’, differed from Topics 1 and 2. First, there was no apparent relationship between this topic and attitudes towards immigration. The curve is nearly flat, meaning that respondents with different views concerning immigration were represented in this topic. This fit well with the more distanced views presented in the topic. In addition, the topic was associated with somewhat higher motivation to control prejudice, which also fit well with the fact that the responses affirmed asylum seekers’ need for asylum. Although these respondents were

not necessarily more positive towards immigration, they were somewhat more motivated to control their prejudice towards immigrants. Both Topics 2 and 3 represented two affirming views of asylum seekers. They were very different from the ‘Undeserving’ narrative, in that they both recognized asylum seekers’ genuine need for asylum. However, responses scoring high on Topic 2 were more concerned with stating that asylum seekers were human beings who needed help and that we had an obligation to help. Topic 3 was more distanced and descriptive and did not emphasize a willingness to help. Together, the topics presented here represent three distinct narratives of how people perceive asylum seekers. In the remaining parts of this article, I will explore how these perceptions changed after the refugee crisis.

Results and Discussion: Change in Asylum Perceptions

To test the hypothesis that the refugee crisis affected how citizens perceived or viewed asylum seekers, I plotted the results of the three-topic model with the wave of the data collection as covariate variables. Figure 2 presents the results. It shows that asylum-related perceptions in Norway changed after the refugee crisis. More responses were associated with the topic ‘Deserving/Distanced’ and fewer responses with the topic ‘Deserving/Involved’ after the refugee crisis. There was no change in the topic ‘Undeserving’. These results are striking for several reasons. They suggest that asylum seekers are more likely to be perceived as people fleeing from war or difficult situations and seeking refuge in another country and less likely to be perceived as human beings in need of help, whom we need to help. The topic ‘Deserving/Involved’, which covered responses of a more involved and humanizing nature, was less prominent in the post-crisis period. However, the perceptions did not change towards undeserving. There was no increase in the responses related to the topic

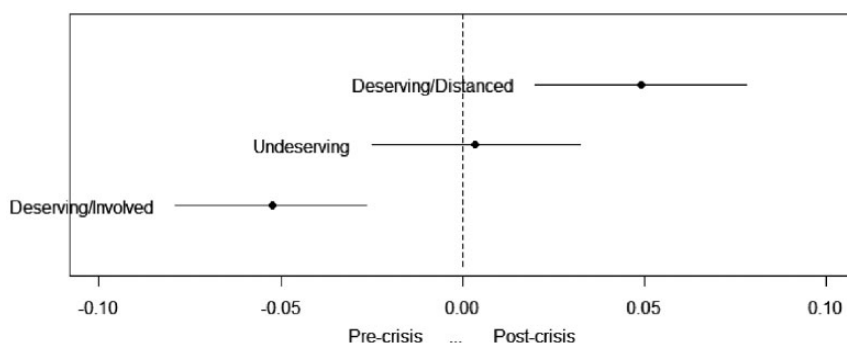


Figure 2
Change in Asylum Perceptions Post Crisis

‘Undeserving’. Rather, the change occurred between the two topics ‘Deserving/Involved’ and ‘Deserving/Distanced’. Considering the low N of the pre-crisis wave, the 5 per cent increase is substantial.

The results shown in Figure 2 underscore the added insight into opinion change gained from studying open-ended questions. There was no increase in the responses viewing asylum seekers as undeserving. The change was of a more subtle character and occurred between the two deserving categories, both acknowledging asylum seekers’ genuine need for asylum, with one being more involved and one being more distanced.

To elaborate on this perspective, Figure 3 demonstrates the change in asylum-related perceptions pre and post crisis on the respondents’ attitudes towards immigration. The model was estimated by regressing the topic proportions with the covariate variables and interacting immigration attitudes with the wave of the data collection.

The results show that there was a significant difference between the pre- and post-crisis waves regarding the ‘Deserving/Distanced’ and ‘Deserving/Involved’ narratives on attitudes towards immigration. Respondents who viewed immigration as an advantage talked 10 per cent more about ‘Deserving/Distanced’ after the refugee crisis than before. Those respondents who believed that immigration was an advantage to Norway talked most about ‘Deserving/Involved’, but less about this topic post crisis. Respondents with more negative views about immigration did not change their views of asylum seekers post crisis. Finally, for the ‘Undeserving’ topic, the same pattern can be applied. Respondents who believed that immigration was a disadvantage to Norway talked most about ‘Undeserving’. However, there was no change in their views of asylum seekers post crisis. This is an important finding in terms of reactions to the refugee crisis. It implies that, although there was a change in people’s perceptions regarding asylum seekers, the change was restricted to a specific set of voters. Perceptions of asylum seekers turned from a more involved, humanizing perspective towards a more distanced one—from ‘Deserving/Involved’ to ‘Deserving/Distanced’.

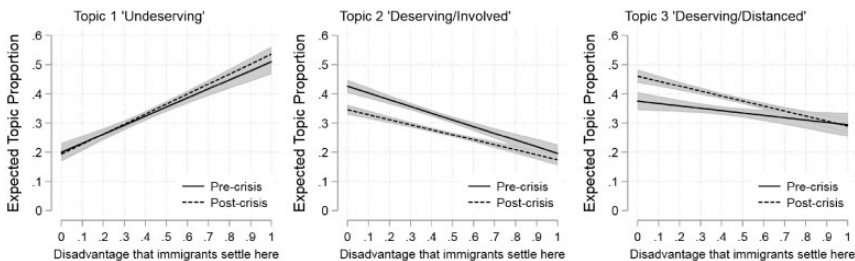


Figure 3
Change in Asylum Perceptions over Attitudes towards Immigration

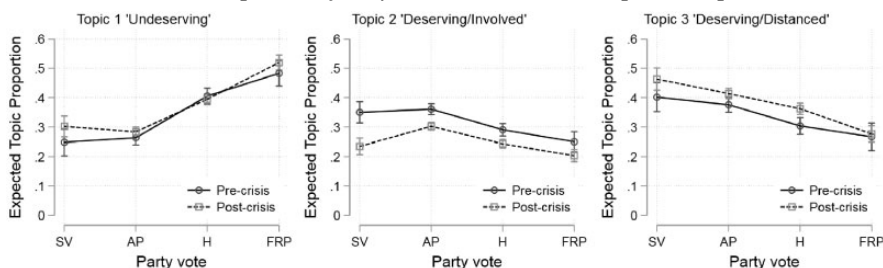


Figure 4
Change in Topic Proportion among Voters

Change in Perception by Party

There is a legitimate question of whether the changes observed were uniform across subsets of voters. The analysis presented in Figure 4 shows that, interestingly, they were not. Most of the change documented above took place among left-leaning voters and not among those on the far right. Figure 4 shows the estimated topic proportions of the three topics for each party's voters pre and post crisis. The political parties used in the estimation are the Socialist Left Party (SV), the Labor Party (AP), the Conservative party (H) and the FrP.

Interestingly, those voters who did *not* vote for Norway's far-right party were those who changed. This is an important finding in relation to party politics. One explanation can be that they had already made up their minds about asylum seekers and that their perceptions regarding asylum seekers therefore remained unaffected. In addition, the strict asylum deal fought through by the far right may have pleased these voters. The results from this article demonstrate that, although there were fewer involved and humanizing responses, change did not occur all the way through. No increase was recorded in the responses that viewed asylum seekers as undeserving. The change occurred between the two categories that both acknowledged asylum seekers' need for asylum—from deserving and involved to deserving and distanced. Time has yet to show the longevity of these changes.

Conclusion

How do people perceive asylum seekers and how did this change in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis? This article has demonstrated a range of different perceptions of what an asylum seeker is. The analysis showed that citizens' responses can be placed in three distinct categories. The first topic, 'Undeserving', categorized asylum seekers as undeserving immigrants taking advantage of the welfare system and destroying Norwegian culture. The second topic, 'Deserving/Involved', represented the opposite view. Here, asylum seekers were viewed as human beings who needed help and that we had an obligation to help them. Like Topic 2, the third topic, 'Deserving/Distanced', presented a very different view compared to the 'Undeserving'

narrative. In this topic, asylum seekers were viewed as individuals fleeing from war and persecution, having to leave their country to seek refuge in another country. Topics 2 and 3 both represented an acknowledgement of asylum seekers' need for asylum, albeit in distinct ways. Topic 3 was more distanced and neutral, while Topic 2 was more involved.

In the analyses of attitude change in the wake of the refugee crisis, it is between these two topics that we can detect some level of change. No increase was recorded in responses related to asylum seekers as 'Undeserving'. This is an important finding in relation to the *content* of the change. Using open-ended responses thus makes it possible to detect more fine-grained changes in public opinion. The shift in opinion regarding asylum seekers in response to the refugee crisis in Norway occurred between the two categories that both acknowledged asylum seekers, not the one that rejected them. The change can be seen as more subtle—from 'Deserving/Involved' to 'Deserving/Distanced'. It occurred between voters who held more positive views about immigration as well as those of the non-far-right parties. The results presented in this article demonstrate the importance of collecting these types of data to gain a more in-depth view of public opinion regarding political issues as well as to gain a more in-depth view of attitude change.

Finally, an implication of this article's findings is that it cannot untangle the causal mechanisms. There is uncertainty around what causes these changes in public opinion regarding asylum seekers. Most likely, these changes are caused by the large, rapid influx of asylum seekers. However, the changes could also have been influenced by the media debate and the way in which the media framed the refugee crisis. Regardless of what might have elicited these changes in public opinion, this article sheds new light on public opinion regarding asylum seekers and demonstrates how this changed after the refugee crisis.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Journal of Refugee Studies* online.

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1. The text box used for the second wave was somewhat larger than the one used in the first round of data collection. It is therefore impossible to know whether the increase in *N* words is caused by the salience of the refugee crisis or the larger text box. It is likely that both factors have had an effect on the number of words that people write.
2. This measure of attitudes towards immigration is also used in the European Social Survey.

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