

“WE WOULD SEEK REFUGE TOO...”: HOW THE RESIDENTS OF THE “NUMBERED STREETS” OF MISKOLC THINK ABOUT REFUGEES AND THE REFUGEE SITUATION*

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To “fight criminality,” the city of Miskolc accepted a public security regulation in May 2014. According to this regulation people who live in “slums” can receive up to 2 million forints if they leave their “social housing” and buy new property outside the city. This regulation also concerned so-called “Numbered Streets”. These are the streets where Roma families live, generally in big families, who are poor and encounter discrimination in the labor market. Meanwhile, the Equal Treatment Authority declared that the city of Miskolc negatively discriminated against these citizens, and the city was obligated to pay a penalty and create a detailed resettlement plan. But the eviction process is still going on. Many people had to leave their homes and entire families had to move to apartments which were unaffordable to them or were in much worse condition. Since the families are afraid that if they become homeless, the child protection authority will take their children from them, many of them have already left their homes and moved to Canada and asked for refugee status. Currently you can’t find a single family on the Numbered Streets that isn’t concerned by this situation. Everybody has a relative, a brother or sister, a son or daughter, who lives in Canada now because this country received them to save them from the danger of homelessness. The main question of my research is: how do these people think about refugees and the refugee situation? I analyzed interviews from the theory of social representations approach.

Introduction

Since 2015, a new term has begun to dominate Hungarian public discourse: “migránsok” (migrants).¹ Due to the refugee situation at Keleti Railway Station and the related measures of the Hungarian government—i.e., building fences along the southern border of Hungary—the media provided a wide variety of coverage on the acts of the refugees. However, this topic was introduced in the news in a way that presented those people who had to leave their homes in order to save themselves and their families from the danger of war and violence as a dangerous mob with bad intentions (Szabolcsi 2017; Bernáth & Messing, 2015; and also see “Democracy Reporting International,” 2016).

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¹ The choice of this word is telling, because the different terms imply different attitudes towards these people. While the Hungarian word “menekült” (refugee, from the verb “menekülni”, to flee) suggests sympathy towards them, the word “migráns” bears neutral or negative connotations.

This paper does not analyse how much Hungarian public opinion about refugees has changed, but—with the aid of semi-structured interviews—examines the way in which a certain group of people was able to cope with the contradiction between the picture drawn in the media and their personal attitudes, the latter of which directed them to accept and sustain humanitarian values.

In this research project, I have analysed semi-structured interviews. In the following, I will introduce our group of interview subjects, who have been in a very unique situation since 2014. Then, because we analysed the interviews using Moscovici's (1961) approach, we will summarize the theory of social representation and one of the most well-known strands of this theory, the central nucleus theory (Abric, 1993; Moliner & Abric, 2015). Finally, after presenting the results of the analysis, I will try to draw conclusions and propose a direction in which we could develop the approaches utilized.

The situation of the “Numbered Streets” of Miskolc

With a small documentary-group,² we have been conducting video interviews in the “Numbered Streets” of Miskolc since 2014. First, I will introduce the situation of this neighborhood.

In order to “fight criminality,” the city of Miskolc passed a public security regulation in May 2014. According to this regulation, people who live in “slums” can get as much as 2 million forints if they leave their “social housing” and buy new property outside the city. This regulation concerned the so-called “Numbered Streets” as well. These are the streets where Roma families live; there are generally big families, who are poor and feel discriminated against in the labour market. Meanwhile, as the Equal Treatment Authority declared that the city of Miskolc negatively discriminated against these citizens, the city was obligated to pay a penalty and create a detailed resettlement plan. The eviction process is still ongoing. Many people had to leave their homes, and whole families had to move to flats they could not afford or which were in very bad condition.

Since the families are afraid that if they become homeless, the child protection authority will take their children from them, many of them have already left their homes, moved to Canada, and asked for refugee status. Currently there is not a single family in the “Numbered Streets” that is not concerned by this situation. Everybody has a relative, a brother or sister, a son or daughter who lives in Canada now, because this country received them in order to save them from the danger of homelessness.

This research project explores how these people think about refugees and the refugee situation.

² With Edit Kószegi and Máté Balogh.

The Interviews

In order to reveal the opinions of our interview subjects we conducted 11 interviews with 13 people. In the course of semi-structured interviews, we asked subjects to tell us about:

- a.* who from their family was in Canada, and what they have heard about the conditions in Canada;
- b.* their opinion about the refugee situation in general;
- c.* their opinion about the fence along the southern border of Hungary;
- d.* their opinion of the refugee-quota;
- e.* danger to their workplace;
- f.* the source of their information;
- g.* their motivations, intention of moving to Canada.

Theory of Social Representations

The theory that served as a frame in the analysis of our interviews is the theory of social representations formulated by Moscovici (1961). Nowadays this social constructionist theory is well known in social psychology, and there has been much research inspired by it. According to this theory, “individuals and groups create representations in the course of communication and co-operation,” and representations help us to construct our common social knowledge. The fundamental function of social representations is to “make the unfamiliar familiar,” and there are two mechanisms to achieve this aim: anchoring and objectification. The first mechanism helps us to classify new ideas into pre-established categories, while objectification turns abstract ideas into concrete objects.

A fundamental structure theory within social representations is central core theory or central nucleus theory (Abric, 1993; Moliner & Abric, 2015).³ According to this approach, representations are organized in a dual system, because they consist of central and peripheral elements. While central elements are stable over time and are based on significant consensus among group members, peripheral elements are varying and unstable and show many differences among group members; thus, they represent the heterogeneity of the group.

³ Developed by Jean-Claude Abric (1993) and the Aix-en-Provence group in France.

There are several studies dealing with social representations, and they use different methodological approaches, including qualitative approaches such as interviews and quantitative approaches, such as surveys.

Generally, studies using central core theory as a theoretical background during their analyses are surveys, because they need a sufficient quantity of data to attain valid results. Nevertheless, I analyzed the interviews to find central and peripheral elements of the social representation of refugees to figure out which part of this representation is the core-element, i.e., what ideas the residents of the “Numbered Streets” share about refugees.

Central Core of the Representation of Refugees

In order to define the central and peripheral elements of the representation of refugees I analysed the interviews to find out what the interview subjects mentioned first and which elements were mentioned by all of them.

I found that the central element was *acceptance*, the opinion that: *We have to let those in need come into the country, and we have to help those who need our help to survive*. Every interview subject mentioned this opinion.

There was another opinion that was the same in every interview: *children are innocent, and we have to help them unconditionally, and if somebody or something hurts them, it is unacceptable*. For example, in some interviews people described or mentioned images of children dead in the sea, with the purpose of emphasizing the cruelty of decision makers —*Why did they let them die?*— or their own empathy.

Children were also mentioned in connection with the fence, but this belongs to the peripheral elements of the representation of “refugees,” which I will discuss in the next section of my paper.

Peripheral Elements of the Representation of Refugees

According to the interviews, the most important peripheral element of this representation is the image of the terrorist. When in their first sentence the interview subjects say, “Let them come in... just don’t blow us up!” we can feel that the interview subjects associated the notion of refugees with the notion of terrorists, so these two phenomena are quite close to each other in their minds. However, to save these people and to be afraid of them at the same time is a contradiction. Therefore, in the interviews in which the picture of the terrorist appears, the struggle to dissolve this contradiction appears as well.

In one of the interviews, a woman who mentioned terrorism argued “we would seek refuge too, if the war broke out here,” and she repeated this sentence three times. Moreover, we heard this sentence from another woman in

another interview, so we can say that this opinion is commonly shared among the residents of the “Numbered Streets.” Therefore, in this case, these women tried to dissolve the contradiction by emphasizing empathy.

Interview segment⁴ No. 1:

S1: Well, yes, but if you look among them, they are not the same. It is as if a war broke out here, and people would leave. Or this is the same thing as when here they began tearing down houses, a lot of people’s houses were taken away, these people became homeless, and went to Canada as a refugee, so that they won’t lose their children, because their children would have been taken away into an institute, and they had to do something. It wouldn’t have been nice for these people either if they wouldn’t have been accepted when something happened in Hungary. So we shouldn’t handle these cases as one. Okay, tighten the rules, I agree with the government, it is obvious that the government is concerned about the country and the people, but I think, if somebody... Okay, we can’t filter them, but for example, if somebody is really a refugee with kids and with old people, well an 80-year-old woman and an 80-year-old man will not detonate a bomb, I think.

However, there is another “strategy” to resolve this contradiction: if the refugees do not deserve our help, then we can cope with our conscience, so if we emphasize the negative characteristics of immigrants we feel less pressure from this contradiction. But how can we do that? In one of the interviews, the subject told us some stories about immigrants who acted immorally. She mentioned, for example, a woman who hit her baby—a child who is the most innocent creature according to the views of the interview subjects. She also related a story that was built from various fragments from the news. It was not true, but it could be used to emphasize the bad acts of immigrants.

In this interview, one cannot help but note the usage of the words “refugee” and “migrant.” The choice of term seemed to depend on the context in which the word is chosen.

Interview segment No. 2:

S2: I don’t mind, let them come in. Just don’t blow us up! You get what I mean? Well, if there is a decent family... we go to Canada from here as well. How many people went to Canada! Well, it is good for the Hungarians when they are accepted, but Hungarians accept nobody! But it depends on the person, because... Well among these people, there are some who blow things up, and there are some who don’t, do you get me? The state has to sort them out. If somebody moves into the country, a decent family, a refugee family, well oh dear. It is good for Hungarians as well when they are accepted.

⁴ Interview segments can be viewed on Youtube: <https://youtu.be/h9GDZx-2z1w>

I: And have you heard about the fence that was built in the autumn or summer, what is your opinion about it?

S2: This is a good thing. I watch TV, well, what did they do there (at the fence)? They throw stones at the police, they shake the fence like crazy people. Small children got hurt because they threw them over the fence, imagine that. There is a video, Pisti told me, that there is a migrant woman, it is online, she wants to breastfeed her baby, and she is hitting her baby, a small baby, and she takes the baby's mouth and she twists it so that it starts to bleed.

In this interview and in another as well, the image of the fraudulent immigrant appears. These "fake-refugees" do not come from the war zone or they are not poor. Why is it a problem that they are not poor? Because the residents of the "Numbered Streets" can feel empathy towards those people whose houses are ruined, and who escape from homelessness, and who because of this need our help. However, if the refugees have a lot of money the interview subjects regard them as frauds, and if the refugees cannot be trusted, they might as well be terrorists.

Interview segment No. 3:

S3: For example, I don't know if you have seen this report, right Jóska, he pretended that he was poor and miserable, a refugee. They were in Pest already, and there were two nappies, and in one nappy there was poop, and the other nappy was full of money. So, are they refugees?

S4: Well, here no one can tell who is really in trouble, who should be accepted into the country, whatever minister he could be, he can't find out who is a terrorist.

S3: We can't tell whether he is a terrorist or not, because it was a set up, and we were sorry as well when we saw him on TV, he was so miserable and everything, give him refugee status and everything. Really, these people deserve a small apartment, well Pest is big and enormous, and they are somewhere else anyway, so give them a home, accept them, they have a small baby and other kids, too.

(...)

S3: Yes, well, but we don't know who is and who is not (a refugee/terrorist), they pretend that they are poor. Of course, refugees from the war zone have to be accepted obviously, because it is war zone. But a lot of people don't come from the war zone, they just pretend that they are from there, a lot of them get caught with fake passports, so it is obvious, we watch the news.

Conclusions of the Analysis

Those subjects who say that Hungary has to let every refugee who wants to come in into the country did not mention the phenomenon of terrorism. They watch the news, but they might not want to integrate the news into the refugee image that is in their mind. It is interesting to note that one of the families who shared this opinion went to Canada a few years ago, but they did not receive refugee status and thus had to come home. The other family—a man and a woman—who had a very strong opinion about the refugee situation, saying that we have to let all of them into the country, had a strong and negative opinion of the government and used the interview situation to underline and confirm how much they disagree with the government.

As we have seen in one case, a woman was afraid of terrorism, but she also said that we should let them in. In this case, she did not talk much about frightening examples but she emphasized similarity: “We would seek refuge too, if the war broke out here.” It seems this was a strategy to get over the contradiction between empathy and fear.

In other interviews, the subjects created new categories from known elements:

- “the evil immigrants” (for example, the woman who hit her baby);
- “the fraudulent immigrants,” who we cannot trust.

In these cases, it is important to emphasize that they are not *refugees* any more. They are *migrants*.

Overall, we can claim that those subjects who tried to harmonize the image of the refugees present in the news and their own accepting attitude had to face a cognitive challenge. It seems that those who believe that the refugees need help and see helping them as a moral obligation have to stop watching the news or at least ignore it so that they can avoid being confused.

Points of View

In his paper—like in several works in social psychology—Gordon Sammut (2015) examines the questions: “How do individuals orientate themselves in what appears to be plurality of perspectives? Why do they adopt one perspective and not another? And adopting a certain perspective, how do they then treat others who hold a different perspective?” (Sammut, 2015, p. 96) Generally, the social psychological answers to these questions contain the notion of attitude. According to Sammut, however, there is an alternative way for understanding how individuals orientate themselves. This was originally proposed by Asch (1952, 1987), who introduced the notion of *point of view*, but Sammut goes on and frames the *nested model of social behaviour* “that includes reference to societal dynamics, situational circumstances of orienting oneself amidst a plurality of views, as well as sociocognitive inclinations that individuals demonstrate in social relations” (Sammut, 2015, p. 96–97).

To create his model Sammut uses three notions: attitudes, social representations, and points of view. The theory of social representations is needed for constituting his model because this theory countervails the individualistic aspect of the notion of attitude by foregrounding the social rather than the individual. As Sammut writes: “While attitude is clearly a cognitive attribute of the individual even in its aggregate form—namely, public opinion—social representations are held to be intrinsically social.” (Sammut, 2015, p. 98) Nevertheless, Sammut emphasizes that these two notions are not sufficient to transcribe and explain social behaviour. Though an attitude represents an individual’s sum total evaluation of an attitude object, “[i]t does not, however, provide an explanation for why individuals resort to certain courses of action given a certain stimulus... Social representations on the other hand, describe context-rational behaviour that is deemed reasonable in certain circumstances... Social representations do not, however, explain why such context-rational behaviour may be adopted by some individuals but not by similar others facing the same circumstances.” (Sammut, 2015, p. 99)

To solve this problem, Sammut proposes completing the model with Asch’s notion of the *point of view*, because it can bridge the gap between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal. The *point of view* is able to connect the individual and the social spheres of psychological activity. Asch’s notion “constitutes an individual’s perspective towards a social object or event, oriented towards others’ perspectives,” and the points of view “enable individuals to participate in a mutually shared psychological field... In a systemic and relational context, each subject’s point of view is mutually intelligible. A subject is able to adopt a perspective and interrelate with others on the basis of it, because others can comprehend one’s point of view even if they can disagree with it.” (Sammut, 2015, p. 103)

In a *nested model of social behaviour*, social representations theory provides societal-level—and attitudes provide personal-level—explanations of social behaviour. An individual’s point of view implicates attitudes and it is implicated in social representations, so it contains the individual’s “actual perception of the event in a given situation and given the individual’s own inclinations (i.e., attitudes) and environmental factors.” (Sammut, 2015, p. 108)

Conclusions

One of the main similarities between central core theory and the nested model of social behaviour is that both of them work with “the disagreement” between individuals who belong to the same social groups in which they constructed their common social representations. According to central core theory, the peripheral elements of social representations assure the heterogeneity of the group, where they are accepted even if they represent the opposite sides of a certain opinion. On the other hand, the different points of view—in the nested model of social behaviour—are mutually intelligible and accepted like peripheral elements.

In my research, it seems that subjects maintained the same social representation of refugees and had similar attitudes toward them, but had different points of view. We can say that the peripheral elements of social representation of the refugees determine the different points of view. However—in this situation—the point of view

of a given person depends on whether he or she ignores the news on the “terrifying migrants” presented in the media or tries to harmonize them with his or her accepting attitude.

There are different points of view that consider refugees on different—global, national, and personal—levels. Metaphorically speaking, we can say that some people look at refugees from the perspective of war, some look at them from the perspective of their own experiences in Canada, while others look at them from behind the fence at the southern border or according to their monetary situation. Nevertheless, the common opinion of this community is that Hungary has to accept refugees, so this can be considered a common value; the norm is the duty of helping people.

It would be very instructive to study how different points of view relate to each other in a community like this, where common opinion is so unambiguous. Do members of the community really understand each other’s different points of view, as Sammut (2015) supposed?

With respect to future research it would be useful to find an answer to the following questions: How do conversations, exchanges of thoughts, and learning about new points of view on a certain topic influence social representations and attitudes? and how do all these affect whether someone becomes resistant or susceptible to the fear-inciting news published by the media regarding refugees?

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