

Refugee Crisis – Psychology’s contribution to comprehension and intervention



Psychology for the European Citizens *European Semester*

Márcio Pereira

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More than 4 million Syrian refugees registered in different parts of the world and more than 7 million who are internally displaced (UNHCR).



Europe's has been struggling to harmonize asylum policy.

Meanwhile some of the worse tragedies in 2015 include:

- Two boats carrying about 500 migrants sank after leaving Zuwara in Libya on 27 August;
- The bodies of 71 people, believed to be Syrian migrants, were discovered in an abandoned lorry in Austria on 27 August;
- A shipwreck off Italy's Lampedusa island killed about 800 people on 19 April;
- At least 300 migrants are feared to have drowned after attempting to cross the Mediterranean in rough seas in early February



**“You have to understand,
No one puts their children in a boat
Unless the water is safer than the land”**

Warsan Shire (British-Somali poet)



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Why the we (European community) not promptly respond to this humanitarian crisis?



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Other than a tiny proportion of sociopaths, **our species is naturally empathetic.**



Concepts of social psychology theories that help us understand

- **Social Identity Theory** (Tajfel, 1979)
 - The central hypothesis of social identity theory is that group members of an in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group, thus enhancing their self-image.



- “us” vs. “them” (i.e. “in-group” v.s “out-group”; e.g. “European” vs. “Syrians”)



Concepts of social psychology theories that help us understand

- Henri Tajfel proposed that **stereotyping** (i.e. putting people into groups and categories) is based on a normal cognitive process: the tendency to group things together. In doing so we tend to exaggerate:
 1. the differences between groups;
 2. the similarities of things in the same group.



Concepts of social psychology theories that help us understand

- **Intergroup Bias and Attributions**

- Attributions refer to judgements or causal explanations about human behavior used to make sense of environment but often influenced by motivational biases such as the need to maintain and enhance self-esteem (internal/dispositional vs. external/situational factors);
- In naturally occurring groups (as well as in laboratory conditions), in-group favoritism is common;
- individuals are more likely to make internal attributions for positive behaviors by in-groups (kindness, honesty and intelligence) and external attributions for the same behaviors by out- groups (circumstances);
- out-group derogation increases when identity is under threat.



Concepts of social psychology theories that help us understand

- **Cognitive dissonance theory** stipulates that we feel uncomfortable when we hold two conflicting beliefs at the same time. We also experience cognitive dissonance if we act in conflict with a belief or value. For example, I value Human life, but I'm doing nothing to help.

There are several ways we can do this. In the example 'refugees need our help' we could:

- add extra cognitions to justify ourselves ('help at home first');
- ignore conflicting information (e.g. avoiding the news);
- change the cognition which causes conflict ('they are not victims, they're economic migrants not refugees');
- change our behaviour to make it in line with the original belief (i.e. doing something to help).



Concepts of social psychology theories that help us understand

- **Migrant vs. Refugee**
- Migrant [covers] all cases where the decision to migrate is *taken freely by the individual concerned*, for reasons of 'personal convenience' and without intervention of an external compelling factor.
- Refugee as someone who's forced to leave her country due to persecution based on her "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."

To those who view them sympathetically, they're refugees; to those who want them kept out, they're migrants.



Concepts of social psychology theories that help us understand

- **Diffusion of responsibility** is a psychological phenomenon in which people are less likely to take action or feel a sense of responsibility in the presence of a large group of people. Essentially, in a large group of people, people may feel that individual responsibility to intervene is lessened because it is shared by all of the onlookers.

Factors that can decrease diffusion of responsibility include:

- **Knowing the victim:** People are more likely to help if they feel some sort of connection or personal knowledge of the person in trouble.
- **Calling on a specific individual for help:** Decreasing the psychological distance between the victim and the onlooker.
- **Having the skills to help:** People often fail to assist because they feel unqualified to help. A person who has received specific training in life-saving, first aid, and CPR will probably feel more capable of stepping up and offering assistance.



Concepts of social psychology theories that help us understand

- **Social conformity** is a type of social influence involving a change in belief or behavior in order to fit in with a group.
 - This change is in response to real (involving the physical presence of others) or imagined (involving the pressure of social norms / expectations) group pressure;
 - The term conformity is often used to indicate an agreement to the majority position, brought about either by a desire to *'fit in'* or be liked (normative) or because of a desire to be correct (informational), or simply to conform to a social role (identification).



What we need to do to fight these cognitive and social mechanisms?

- We need to humanize showing the reality of refugees: their names, their faces, what they fled, ...

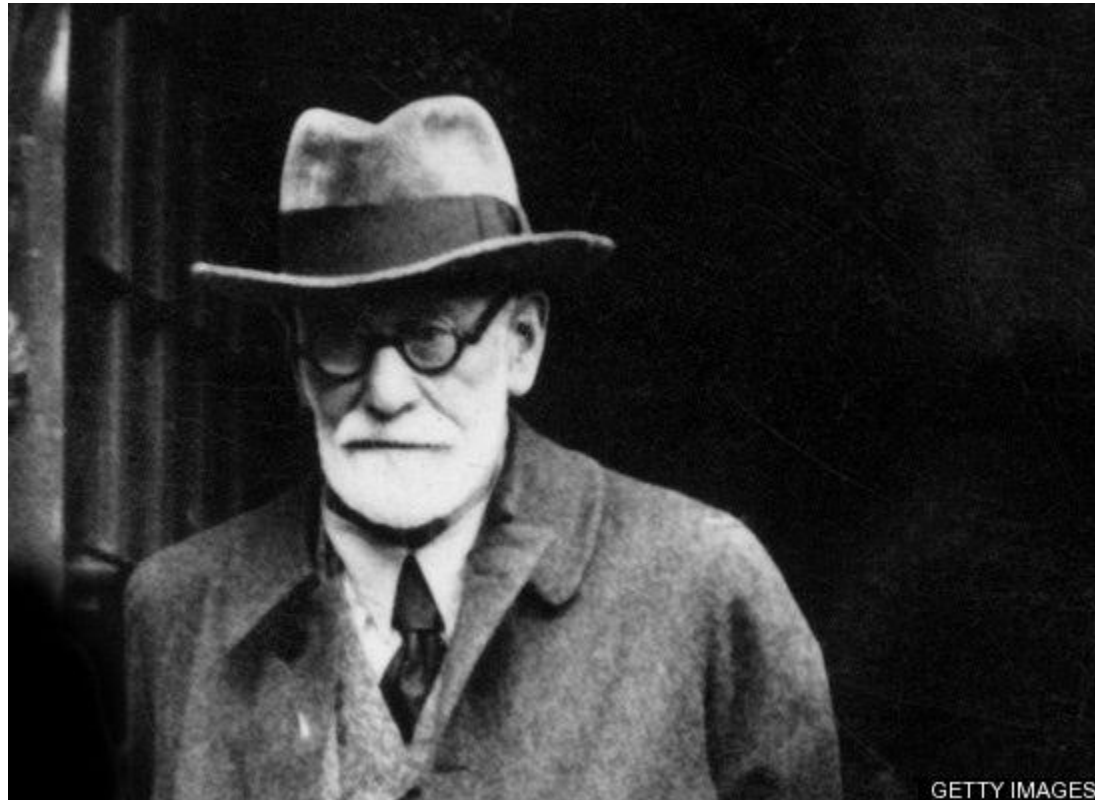




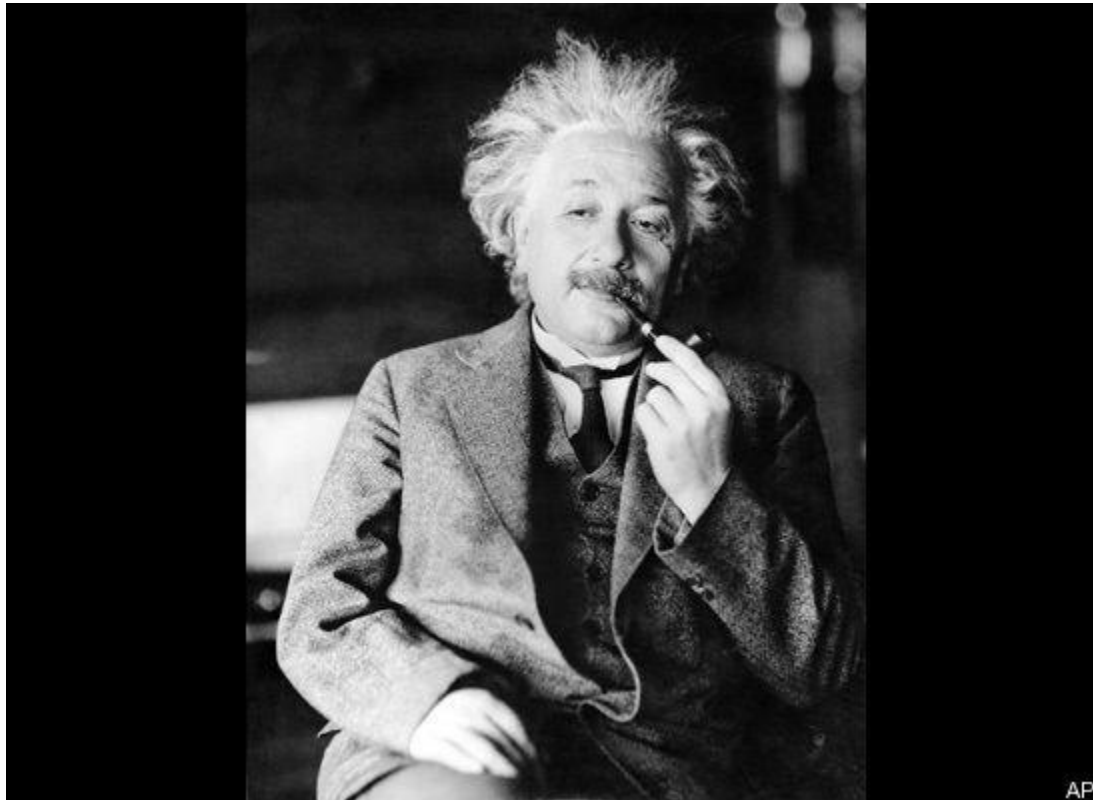


What we need to do to fight these cognitive and social mechanisms?

- We need to show that refugees also have knowledge/competencies and can help countries where they are going.



Sigmund Freud: The founder of psychoanalysis, Freud had to flee to London at 84, after having lived in Austria for 79 years, when Hitler's army attacked Austria, proclaiming union with Germany.



Albert Einstein: In 1933, Einstein, a prominent German scientist, was accused of treason by the Third Reich. He then sought refuge in the United States.



Mohammad: It is a Syrian doctor saving lives in Portugal.



What we need to do to fight these cognitive and social mechanisms?

- We need find similarities between groups.



Who are them? Syrians?





Who are them? Syrians?





Who are them? Syrians?



These are Europeans trying to reach north Africa during 2nd World War



Who are them? Syrians?





Who are them? Syrians?



These are Portuguese refugee's escaping from the colonial war in Africa.



Considerations about the psychological support to the refugee population

- Get to know the culture and context

Ethnic diversity and language (Hassan *et al.* 2015)

- Around nine to ten percent of Syria's population is Kurdish (close to two million people), followed by Turkmen, Assyrians, Circassians and Armenians.
- Prior to the current conflict, Syria hosted significant numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers. The large majority originated from Iraq and Palestine, but there were also smaller groups from Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and other countries.
- Arabic is the official language. The second most common language is Kurdish.



Considerations about the psychological support to the refugee population

- Know the estimated rates of mental disorder after conflict (Hassan et al. 2015)

BOX 1: WHO PROJECTIONS OF MENTAL DISORDERS IN ADULT POPULATIONS AFFECTED BY EMERGENCIES [65]		
	Before the emergency 12-month prevalence ^a	After the emergency 12-month prevalence ^b
Severe disorder (e.g. psychosis, severe depression, severely disabling form of anxiety disorder)	2% to 3%	3% to 4% ^c
Mild or moderate mental disorder (e.g. mild and moderate forms of depression and anxiety disorders, including mild and moderate posttraumatic stress disorder)	10%	15% to 20% ^d
Normal distress / other psychological reactions (no disorder)	No estimate	Large percentage

^a The assumed baseline rates are median rates across countries as observed in World Mental Health Surveys.
^b The values are median rates across countries. Observed rates vary with assessment method (e.g. choice of assessment instrument) and setting (e.g. time since the emergency, sociocultural factors in coping and community social support, previous and current exposure to adversity).
^c This is a best guess based on the assumption that traumatic events and loss may contribute to a relapse in previously stable mental disorders, and may cause severely disabling forms of mood and anxiety disorders.
^d It is established that traumatic events and loss increase the risk of depression and anxiety disorders, including posttraumatic stress disorder



Considerations about the psychological support to the refugee population

- Follow a multilayer approach (IASC pyramid, in WHO, 2015)

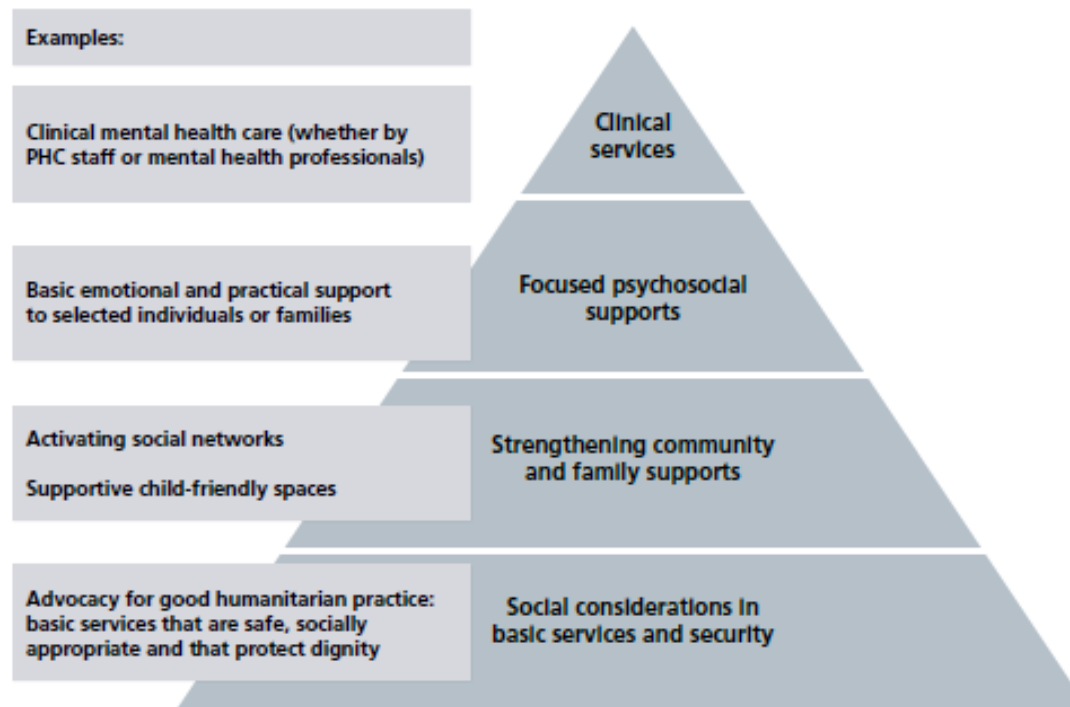
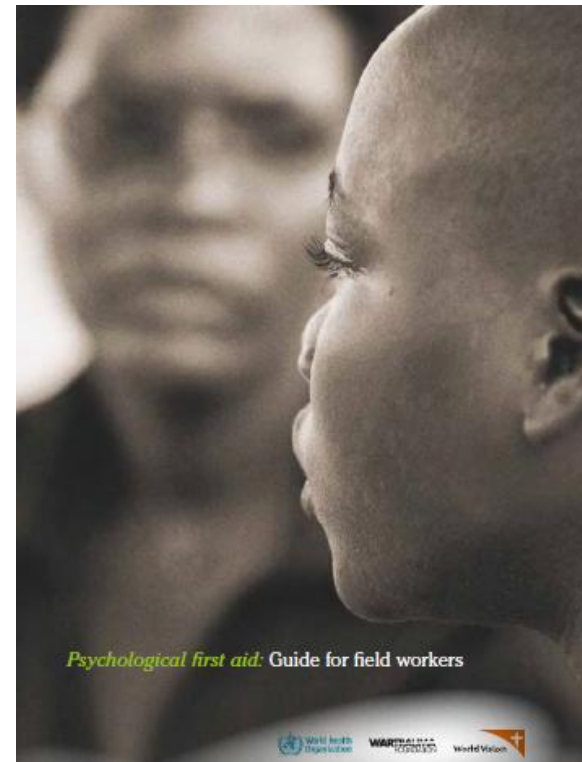
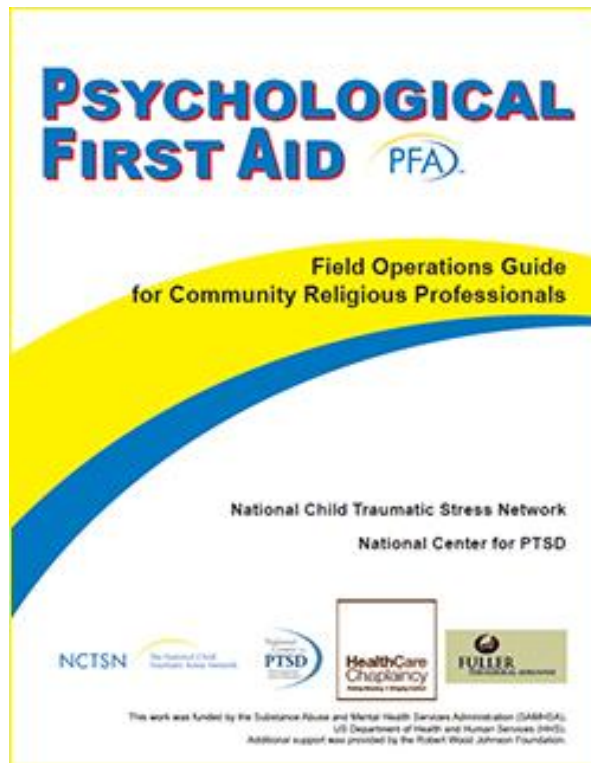


Figure GPC 1. The IASC intervention pyramid for mental health and psychosocial support in emergencies (adapted with permission)



Considerations about the psychological support to the refugee population

- Make use of the Psychological First Aid





Final words

As individuals, despite our different groups (gender, age, region, nationality,...), we can't forget that we all belong a common group – **we are all Humans.**

As professionals, psychologists have the **knowledge to act** in a preventive or remediative form, and can save human suffering and costs to the society.



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HIGH PATRONAGE
OF THE PORTUGUESE
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OF THE PORTUGUESE REPUBLIC



O Presidente da República