

Chapter # 13

UNDERSTANDING GROUP ISSUES: THE SYRIAN REFUGEE EXPERIENCE IN BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

Refugees are people who are outside their countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or social participation, and who are unable (or unwilling) to return home. According to data released by the Brazilian National Committee for Refugees in its eighth edition (BRASIL, 2023), between January 2011 and the end of 2022, Brazil had identified 65,840 people as refugees in Brazil. Among the main countries of nationality or habitual residence of people identified as refugees in the period from 2011 to 2022, Syria stood out, with a total of 3,762 asylum requests granted, following Venezuela, which stood out in recent years. Syrian refugees have acquired great magnitude and representation in the issue that involves the policy of reception and insertion of refugees throughout the world and in Brazil. The arrival of these refugees in Brazil caused different reactions and behaviors, including potential conflicts. This work aimed to discuss the matter of how we see certain groups and their common and right away generalization that naturalizes this view with often preestablished standards without there being reflection and better knowledge about this group of people.

Keywords: social psychology, human rights, refugees.

1. INTRODUCTION

Refugees are individuals who have fled their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or social group, and who are unable or unwilling to return home. According to data released by the National Committee for Refugees in its 8th edition (Brazil, 2023), between January 2011 and the end of 2022, Brazil recognized 65,840 individuals as refugees.

Among the primary countries of nationality or habitual residence of people recognized as refugees during the period from 2011 to 2022, Syria ranks with a total of 3,762 granted asylum applications, falling behind only Venezuela, which has been prominent in recent years. Syrian refugees have gained significant prominence and representation in discussions surrounding refugee reception and integration policies worldwide, including in Brazil. The arrival of these refugees in Brazil has triggered various reactions and behaviors, including potential conflicts. Diverse customs and beliefs have led to reactions ranging from curiosity to rejection, creating a perception of these individuals as a homogeneous group, often based on the idea of uniformity and ignoring their individual differences.

A literature review conducted by Campos and Rosa (2024) on the term "Syrian refugees in Brazil" resulted in a collection of published texts that address various themes concerning this population. The identified texts cover topics such as the experience of refuge and the social integration of refugees into Brazilian society, the reception policies and legislation in Brazil, the issue of religion, and language acquisition, among others. The authors point out that although Brazilian legislation regarding refugees is considered

advanced, there are obstacles to the guarantee and realization of rights stipulated by law. They emphasize the need for joint actions to ensure the full and dignified integration of Syrian refugees into Brazilian society.

Reflecting on the composition of these groups is crucial for understanding the integration of refugees into the host country. In the case of this study, the guiding questions were: Do the Syrians who entered Brazil with refugee status constitute a group? Are they subject to being studied as a group, or are they merely a social aggregate united by the shared suffering caused by the civil war?

2. OBJECTIVE

This work aimed to discuss the issue of how we see certain groups and their common, automatic generalization that naturalizes this view with standards that are often pre-established without there being reflection and better knowledge about this group of people.

3. METHOD

This study is a qualitative research approach that focuses on understanding social phenomena through the collection of rich and descriptive data. According to Bauer and Gaskell (2002), this methodology is particularly useful for investigating questions that cannot be adequately analyzed using quantitative methods, as it seeks to explore the perceptions, experiences, and meanings that individuals attribute to their realities.

3.1. Data Collection

In this study, data was collected through theoretical research to focus on the analysis and discussion of theories, concepts, and ideas, without the collection of empirical data. According to Barros and Lehfeld (2000), theoretical research aims to deepen knowledge and discussions.

3.2. Data Analysis Procedure

To carry out data analysis, the following steps were followed: I) Selection of texts. II) Pre- Analysis, first reading of the material, in order to define, within the possibilities of texts, those that could contribute to the discussion of the proposed theme to achieve the objective of this research. Next, III) Material Exploration was carried out, which consisted of readings of the selected texts, and finally IV) Treatment of results and interpretation, in which, based on the reading of the texts, the aim is to propose inferences and interpretations, thus building knowledge that makes it possible to deepen knowledge about group and intergroup relations, especially Syrian refugees in Brazil. For this study, the selected texts were: 1. Bourdieu, P. (1983a). *O campo científico*. 2. Durkheim, É. (1984). *The division of labor in society*. 3. Jesuíno, J. C., (2004). *Estruturas e processos de grupo*. 4. Moscovici, S. (1978). *A psicanálise: Sua imagem e seu público*. 5. Sherif, M. (1966). *Group conflict and cooperation: Their social psychology*. 6. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1982). *A teoria da identidade social*. To present the results, a text was organized into two topics.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Refugees: Group or Social Aggregate

The concept of a group is central to various disciplines, including social psychology. But what exactly constitutes a group? Generally, a group can be defined as a collection of individuals who interact with each other, share certain common goals or interests, and possess a sense of collective identity. According to Émile Durkheim (1984), groups are considered social entities that exert a coercive force on their members, influencing their opinions and behaviors. For Durkheim, these groups play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and societal order. This perspective underscores the importance of groups in shaping morality and integrating individuals into a broader social context.

Max Weber (1922) defines social groups as collections of individuals who unite around common interests, goals, or values and interact in ways that influence their actions through this association. For Weber, the notion of a group is closely related to the concept of social action, where interactions are meaningful and guided by a shared sense. He emphasizes that the formation of groups is a social process involving both internal structuring and relations with other groups and society at large.

Durkheim (1984) and Weber (1922) present distinct perspectives on social groups. Durkheim emphasizes the role of groups in maintaining social cohesion and order, viewing them as entities that exert a coercive force on individuals. In contrast, Weber focuses on social action and meaningful interaction among group members, highlighting their unity around common interests and values, and concentrating on the internal structuring of groups as well as their relationships with other groups and society. By analyzing the approaches of Durkheim (1984) and Weber (1922), we gain a deeper understanding of the experience of Syrian refugees in Brazil. It is possible to consider, on one hand, the cohesion and social norms within refugee groups, and on the other, the interactions and social structuring that impact their integration into the new society.

Sherif (1966), a pioneer in the analysis of groups, conducted experiments aimed at understanding how groups develop norms and how these norms influence individual behavior. He defines a group as a social unit composed of individuals who interact with each other and adhere to a set of norms and values. Sherif investigated the development and organization of groups, highlighting that cooperation or competition among members leads to the formation of norms and group cohesion. By discussing the dynamics of conflict and cooperation between groups, his theory can help us understand, for example, the interactions between refugees and the host society.

Social Representation Theory (SRT), developed by Serge Moscovici (1978), provides a valuable theoretical foundation for understanding how social groups construct and share meanings about reality. This theory is fundamental to social psychology and offers a deep understanding of the internal dynamics of groups and their interactions with the broader social context. The processes of anchoring and objectification are central to SRT. Anchoring refers to how new information is integrated into existing representations, while objectification pertains to the transformation of abstract concepts into tangible realities that can be shared and discussed within the group. These mechanisms help solidify group beliefs and practices, making them part of the members' everyday lives.

The *Social Identity Theory*, proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1982, posits that an individual's identity is strongly influenced by their affiliation with social groups. This theory suggests that people categorize themselves and others into groups, resulting in a sense of belonging and intergroup behaviors. They proposed that individuals classify themselves into ingroups and outgroups. Key concepts of the theory include: Social

Categorization, where individuals classify themselves and others into groups, facilitating social perception and organization, but also potentially leading to stereotypes and prejudices. Another concept developed by the authors is Social Identity, which comprises an individual's self-image, influenced by their membership in social groups such as ethnicities, religions, or other categories. The authors' theory also explains how competition for resources or status between groups can lead to conflicts and social prejudices.

Tajfel and Turner's (1982) *Social Identity Theory* can be crucial in understanding how the association of Syrian refugees with social groups affects their behaviors, attitudes, and power dynamics with Brazilian society, for example. Upon arriving in Brazil, Syrian refugees encounter a new social reality where they must navigate the categorization of themselves and others into various groups. This categorization may lead to the formation of a strong social identity based on their Syrian origin and their shared experiences as refugees. Social comparison between the ingroup of Syrian refugees and the outgroups within Brazilian society may foster a sense of belonging and internal cohesion, but it can also result in conflicts. Refugees may seek to elevate their social identity relative to other groups, which can lead to favoritism towards fellow compatriots and a perception of discrimination from the host society. These power dynamics and intergroup conflicts can impact the integration of Syrian refugees into Brazilian society. Understanding Social Identity Theory can aid in developing policies and programs that promote inclusion, respect the identity of refugees, facilitate interactions among different groups in society, and address issues of prejudice and discrimination faced by this population.

Based on the definitions provided so far, the question arises: What is required for a social aggregate to be considered a group?

Tajfel and Turner's (1982) theory helps us understand the distinction between Social Group and Social Aggregate, which is fundamental to the discussion of Syrian refugees in Brazil, as proposed in this study. According to these authors, a group is a social unit composed of individuals who interact continuously, share a common identity, and have norms, values, and goals that unite them. Members of a group are regular participants in a collective, and their interactions are meaningful, influencing behaviors and attitudes. In contrast, a social aggregate refers to a collection of individuals who are together in a given space but do not necessarily interact or share a common identity. Members of an aggregate may not have significant social ties or shared objectives, resulting in more superficial interactions. Members of a social aggregate do not perceive themselves as part of a unified social entity, lacking a sense of "us" that would unify them. These definitions are important for understanding how social dynamics operate in different contexts, such as among Syrian refugees in Brazil, where the formation of groups may be crucial for integration and mutual support.

When we referring to a large number of people, in this case refugees, these individuals represent a significant portion of the population who were living their daily lives but were caught up by civil war. They were forced to leave their homes, abandon their jobs and possessions, and ultimately leave their country in order to survive. They were brought together by an incident that gave them a common fate: seeking refuge. This incident may have conferred upon them the status of a group. In this regard, Jesuino (2004) argues that: "Any gathering, regardless of its size, whether it be a crowd, audience, or assembly, constitutes a potential group or, at the very least, it is possible to identify the always latent emergence of group phenomena within it" (p. 299).

According to the same author, several elements are necessary for the formation of a group from a social aggregate: it is fundamental that there be interaction among the members of the aggregate. This interaction must be meaningful and recurrent, allowing for

the exchange of information, feelings, and actions between individuals. Members should share common objectives, goals, or interests that motivate cooperation and coordination among them. These shared objectives provide a sense of purpose to the group and guide collective activities and efforts. The group develops a set of norms and values that regulate members' behavior, establishing what is considered appropriate or inappropriate within the group context. These norms promote the cohesion and stability of the group, facilitating the predictability and coordination of individual actions. Another important aspect for Jesuino (2004) is that members of a group develop a sense of belonging and identification with the group, perceiving themselves as part of a distinct unit from other groups or aggregates. This aspect reinforces the idea that collective identity strengthens the bonds between members and influences their self-esteem and commitment to the group.

4.2. Syrian Refugees in Brazil as a Social Group

Considering the elements outlined above, it is possible to view Syrian refugees in Brazil as a social group. Through social interaction, shared objectives, common norms, social identity, and interdependence, refugees can form groups that facilitate their integration and help them address the challenges of their new reality. Syrian refugees, by coming together in communities or support groups, establish meaningful and recurring interactions. These interactions are crucial for exchanging information about resources, services, and experiences, allowing members to influence one another and build bonds of solidarity that extend beyond mere physical proximity. By setting common goals, such as seeking safety, access to basic services, employment, and integration into Brazilian society, these objectives drive mutual cooperation, fostering a sense of purpose that guides their collective activities and efforts, such as participating in language courses or professional training programs. Within these formed groups, refugees develop norms and values that regulate their behavior. These norms can promote the cohesion and stability of the group, facilitating adaptation to new living conditions and the creation of a collective identity that values their experiences and cultures. The shared experience of resettlement and the quest for a new life in Brazil can contribute to the development of a shared social identity. A sense of belonging may strengthen bonds among members and positively influence their confidence and commitment to the group, helping them in overcoming common challenges in their new environment.

Cichoski (2017) highlights the issue of generalizing collective entities as an undifferentiated whole, arguing that this approach overlooks the nuances and particularities that characterize each group. He emphasizes that treating social groups as singular entities risks simplifying complex dynamics and disregarding the diverse experiences, identities, and contexts that shape collective action. This generalization can lead to erroneous conclusions about the effectiveness and nature of social interactions, as each group has its own norms, values, and power structures that influence its actions. The author advocates for a more detailed and contextualized analysis of collective entities, which takes into account the internal diversity and specificities of each group, thereby allowing for a richer and more accurate understanding of collective action and social relations.

By questioning the generalization of collective entities treated as an undifferentiated whole, Cichoski (2017) argues that this approach overlooks the nuances and particularities that characterize each group. Syrian refugees in Brazil, for example, do not constitute a homogeneous group; they bring with them a diversity of experiences, personal histories, cultures, and social contexts. Generalizing refugees as an undifferentiated collective entity disregards these differences and can lead to policies and approaches that do not address the specific needs of subgroups within the Syrian community. The author emphasizes that such

generalization can obscure these multiple identities, which are crucial for understanding how refugees organize, interact, and adapt to their new society.

The Theory of Field by Pierre Bourdieu's (1983a) can offer valuable insights for the discussion on Syrian refugees in Brazil, particularly in relation to Cichoski's critique of the generalization of collective entities. Bourdieu defines "field" as social spaces where various agents (individuals or groups) compete for resources and capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic). In the context of Syrian refugees, different social fields (such as the labor market, the educational system, and community support networks) can be analyzed to understand how refugees interact and compete for resources. This analysis allows for the identification of the particularities within each subgroup of the refugee community, rather than treating them as a singular entity.

The concept of habitus proposed by Bourdieu (1983b), which refers to the set of dispositions and practices individuals develop based on their experiences and social contexts, is also relevant. Syrian refugees bring with them a habitus formed in their country of origin, which may influence their interactions and adaptations in Brazil. Recognizing how the habitus related to how refugees perceive and engage with the new society can enhance the understanding of social dynamics at play.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to address the issue of how we perceive certain groups and their common and automatic generalization, which often normalizes this view through pre-established standards without adequate reflection and deeper understanding of the group in question. Reviewing literature from social psychology and sociology has allowed us to reflect on the guiding questions: do Syrians who have entered Brazil with refugee status constitute a group? Can they be studied as a group, or are they merely a social aggregate united by the shared suffering caused by civil war?

The analyzed texts enable us to show that the intersection of the concepts of group, social identity, collective action, norms, power structures, and the critique of generalization offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the issue of Syrian refugees in Brazil. This analysis underscores the importance of forming groups that foster solidarity and mobilization, while also reinforcing the unique complexities and challenges faced by each refugee.

Even when considered a group, reflections on Syrian refugees in Brazil must take into account their cultural and social diversity, which, while sharing a common origin, encompasses a mosaic of experiences and identities. Prior to the civil war that began in 2011, Syria was a country with a diverse population in terms of ethnicities, religions, and traditions. This diversity is reflected in the experiences of Syrians who have arrived in Brazil, where they encounter unique challenges and opportunities. Such an aspect leads to a reflection on the generalization of collective entities.

Utilizing these theories allows for the development of more effective policies and interventions that address the specific needs of refugees, facilitating their integration and fostering an environment of inclusion and respect. Building a continuous dialogue between refugees and Brazilian society is essential for promoting empathy, understanding, and social cohesion, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their origin, can contribute to and integrate into the society that welcomes them.

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