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Taking the perspective of others:

A conceptual model and its application to the refugee crisis

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This paper offers a theoretical exploration of the psychological and social processes involved in perspective taking. Constructing the perspective of other people – i.e., how they view themselves, others, and the world – requires perspective takers to mobilise both personal experiences and cultural resources. While these processes are rarely reflected upon in daily interactions with familiar others, they adopt a particular dynamic in the case of less familiar or stigmatised groups such as refugees. To unpack this dynamic, we propose the Commitment Model, which differentiates between essentialism, situationalism, identification and repositioning in perspective taking. These categories are defined and exemplified with social media comments regarding refugees, their worldview and imagined impact on host communities. By examining the different movements involved in perspective taking, we conclude that it is a multifaceted phenomenon that has different pragmatic consequences. It contributes to building more open societies but it can also lead to separating self and other, closing down dialogue and mutual understanding.

Keywords: perspective taking, position exchange, similarity, difference, refugees.

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In the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch famously said that ‘you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it’. This eloquent observation points to the impossibility of becoming other in the sense of fully experiencing the world as another person does. We never ‘truly’ take another’s perspective, at least never in a literal sense. And yet, our own experience of living and interacting with other people on a daily basis paints a different picture. Even if we don’t ‘climb’ and ‘walk’ into another’s skin, we do get to ‘inhabit’ their position and, in psychological terms, adopt their perspective on the world. In this article we address the question of *how* we are capable of this achievement – how we come to ‘take’ the perspective of other people.

This question is certainly old and it continues to generate debate (see, for example, Sammut, Daanen & Moghaddam, 2013). If differences between people are hard to bridge, then how can we live together, particularly in diverse, multicultural societies? This is an important interrogation today. We live at a time when discourses about similarity marginalise others, portraying them as incompressible and dangerous (Muslims, sexual minorities, indigenous people, black and Latino communities, etc.); a time when a false opposition between solidarity and cultural diversity (Tsirogianni & Andreouli, 2011) is set up, giving birth to speeches of hate, intolerance and exclusion on both sides of the Atlantic.

Illustrative of these failures to understand, accept and help others is the situation of refugees coming to Europe from war-torn areas of the world such as

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Syria. The refugee crisis and the European response to it are and will certainly continue to be for many decades a source of painful historical reflection: how was it possible to succumb to fear and denial in the face of an obvious humanitarian crisis? Why was it so hard to try to understand these others, to take their perspectives? Or, rather, how are refugee perspectives constructed in ways that serve detached or outright discriminatory attitudes? In this article, we focus on perspective taking, its processes and outcomes. We will start from a brief review of models of perspective taking before offering our own contribution to this literature. The Commitment Model, described here, will be used to reflect on the situation of refugees and will be exemplified with comments from social media.

Perspective taking, from cognitive to sociocultural models

The reason why perspective taking continues to attract so much attention and increased efforts to cultivate it has to do with the more or less implicit assumption that being able to engage in this process is beneficial for both self and others (see Underwood & Moore, 1982; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Glăveanu, 2015). Much more rarely are studies questioning this trend published; for example Epley, Caruso and Bazerman (2006) found that perspective taking can also increase egotistic reactions and Skorinko and Sinclair (2013) concluded that it could result in more rather than less stereotyping. On the whole, the tendency is to *romanticise* perspective taking and its consequences for self–other relations. The model we propose later on in this paper develops a more balanced view in this regard.

Originating in research done in the 70s, cognitive studies of perspective taking tend to distinguish between visual or perceptual perspectives (what others see) and

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psychological ones, either cognitive (what others think) or emotional (what they feel, close to the notion of empathy). While studies of perceptual perspective taking are interesting in their own right, most research attention in the 1990s and early 2000s was dedicated to the investigation of psychological perspectives. The basic model used to unpack its processes postulates the *merging of self and other representations* in acts of perspective taking. In this context, merging refers “to the fact that the two mental representations come to share an increased number of features” (Davis, Conklin, Smith & Luce, 1996, p. 714) and this happens when either characteristics of the self are progressively applied to others (who thus become more self-like) or the other way around (when the self becomes more other-like).

If our tendency is to project more common characteristics in relating to others, what happens when we are proved wrong? Epley, Keysar, Van Boven and Gilovich (2004) propose in this regard a multistage process of *egocentric anchoring and adjustment* whereby people first use their own perspective to approximate that of others and then look for clues of whether the outcome is plausible or not. Basically, perspective takers are conceived as engaging in a process of hypotheses testing regarding the validity of their egocentric assumptions about others, ‘jumping’ from one hypothesis to the next while assessing the plausibility of each one. The conclusion from such models is that information about the self and stereotypes are the main sources we end up using to construct the mental states of others, particularly less familiar others.

In sharp contrast, sociocultural accounts of perspective taking start from the premise that people inhabit a perspectival world, shaped by exchanges, communication and shared histories. In this framework, perspectives and the act of

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perspective taking are never purely individual constructions but social in their origin, expression, and consequences. This is because perspectives are, from the start, defined in a *relational* manner. In Mead's (1938, p. 115) words, "the perspective is the world in its relationship to the individual and the individual in his relationship to the world". More than this, one's perspectives exists only in relation to the perspectives of others and it is in the process of becoming aware of differences in perspective that we develop as reflective selves.

In this approach, perspectives are not reduced to mental representations, as in the cognitive tradition, but represent *action orientations* guiding us within a given situation (Gillespie, 2006). Differentiating, taking and integrating perspectives are, from a pragmatist standpoint, at the core of what makes us humans, capable of living within a human society. An important distinction that helps us understand this dynamic is the one between positions and perspectives. Perspectives, as action orientations, originate from occupying certain positions in the world, defined in functional terms. These positions often come in pairs, something that reflects their interactional origin – e.g., speaker/listener, doctor/patient, parent/child, student/teacher, buyer/seller – and each position cultivates a certain perspective on the situation – e.g., speakers are meant to address others while listeners are supposed to pay attention. Essential for perspective taking is the fact that we are not fixed within a single position but we get to exchange them within social acts; in the example above, we often get to speak and listen in turn. This process has been conceptualised by Alex Gillespie and Jack Martin (2014) as *Position Exchange Theory* (PET).

And this dynamic, in fact, helps us explain how it is possible to understand people whose position in the world we never get to experience directly. For instance,

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taking the perspective of the opposite gender, of people from foreign countries or, closer to the topic we are concerned with here, of refugees. However, if “a person’s own idiosyncratic experiences are reconciled with those of others through communication and negotiation” (Sammut, Daanen & Moghaddam, 2013, p. 4), how do we take the perspective of someone we never get to communicate with? According to PET, we can do this by evoking recollections of being in similar, even if not identical, positions (e.g., for refugees, being in need of help or shelter). We also make use of cultural resources such as discourses and representations embedded in conversations, mass-media, movies, literature, etc., to construct perspectives we are less familiar with. What we argue further in this paper is that these two processes, although often complementary, are significantly different ways of taking perspectives. This distinction is important because it highlights the difference between constructing perspectives from the ‘inside’ (through identification and re-positioning) or the ‘outside’ (through stereotypes or social representations) and these two processes have distinct pragmatic consequences when it comes to uniting or separating people. Before outlining a model that captures this difference, let us consider more closely what kind of otherness refugees and migrants more generally present us with, and the research conducted on self–other positions in this particular context.

Perspectives on migrants and perspectives of migrants

Migration offers us an excellent context for studying perspectives and perspective taking as it presents us, from the start, with two basic positions: of the foreigner and the local. As noted by Gillespie, Kadianaki and O’Sullivan-Lago (2012, p. 696), geographical movement “is a basis for encountering alterity, that is, other people and

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alternative ways of viewing the world and one's own position within it". However, encountering alterity doesn't necessarily mean *valuing* differences in perspective. And although most of us have been in the position of travellers and hosting those who travel, we rarely draw on these experiences to understand the situation of migrants, particularly refugees. This has to do with a number of reasons. One of them is that travelling and migrating, especially as a refugee, might be experiences too far apart to be 'bridged' through position exchange. More importantly, though, the image of migrants and refugees constructed within Western societies often emphasises difference over similarity, making it harder to identify with their situation. Perspective taking is often achieved in the context of the refugee crisis by mobilising representations of (predominantly) non-white, Muslim men migrating to Europe and bringing with them the values of a foreign religion and culture (frequently portrayed as non-democratic, dismissive of women's rights, etc.), as well as the threat of terrorism and radicalisation. This imagination of radical otherness draws on historical distinctions between the West and the Orient (Said, 1978) and often builds images of a future in which foreigners overcome locals and fundamentally change the host society. This kind of rhetoric hampers the possibility of perspective taking, at least as envisioned by PET. And yet, as we will argue, it does offer plenty of resources to construct the perspective of others through other means.

Existing research on migration tends to examine either *perspectives on* migrants (i.e., the way their experience is understood by locals) or, more rarely, the actual *perspective of* migrants (i.e., their experience in their own terms). An example of the former comes from a research conducted by Tsirogianni and Andreouli (2011) on the social representations of migrants in the UK. The two authors identified, based

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on this study, three types of recognition when it comes to the perspective of migrants:

positive recognition without perspective taking, partial perspective taking, and a recognition of similarity between self and other that leads towards a ‘fusion of horizons’. This typology is particularly interesting since it points to the fact that perspective taking is a multifaceted process, better understood as a continuum.

Kadianaki (2014), on the other hand, offer examples of research studying the actual experience of migrants. She explored the coping strategies of immigrants living in Greece when faced with being stigmatised in the Greek society as well as their communities of origin. Her findings reveal the importance of meaning-making in constructing perspectives of the self as agentic, capable of challenging stigma and transforming social contexts.

The Commitment Model of Perspective Taking (CMPT)

The model we propose in this paper outlines a typology of perspective taking that starts from the basic distinction between different types of ‘commitment’ in perspective taking; i.e., different points of focus – on similarity or difference, person or situation – people adopt and become attached to, in the sense that they often continue to construct perspectives that reflect this focus. Four main types of perspective taking – underpinned by different socio-cognitive processes – are formulated and it is important to note from the start that they are not assumed to be mutually exclusive. Indeed, as any analytical model, the CMPT operates with conceptual distinctions that are often too sharp for how intertwined these processes are in reality. And yet, as we hope to demonstrate here, these distinctions are useful to differentiate between types of perspective taking and to consider their potential

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consequences for self–other relations. Important to note also, CMPT refers to perspective taking in terms of the *construction* of the perspective of others since we believe that perspectives are never ‘taken’ but rather ‘constructed’. This means that perspective taking should not designate only those moments in which the perspective of the other is constructed ‘correctly’; rather we should focus on *how* this perspective is constructed in the first place. This approach does not exclude, of course, a concern for how we can better or more accurately construct the perspective of others.

The basis for distinguishing between *commitment to similarity* and *commitment to difference* in perspective taking – in other words, upholding a firm separation between the positions of self and other versus considering them interchangeable, based on existing overlaps – is suggested also by Gillespie, Kadianaki and O’Sullivan-Lago (2012). In this chapter, the authors differentiate between ‘essential difference’ and ‘essential sameness’ in relating to alterity. According to them, the former postulates a rigid opposition between self and other and mobilises representations that accentuate the opposition, acting as readymade templates for difference and for constructing the perspective of others. In contrast, the latter promotes identification and ‘movement’ between self and other positions. In a certain sense, commitment to similarity favours the process of position exchange, as outlined by Gillespie and Martin (2014) – i.e., being able to evoke the experience of others and thus take their perspective by acknowledging communalities in self–other positioning – while commitment to difference establishes what might be called ‘position rigidity’, whereby even the imaginative repositioning of the self in the situation of the other becomes difficult. This is the difference between taking the perspective of others from the ‘outside’, based on social representations and stereotypical depictions, versus

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attempting to construct it from the ‘inside’, for as much as position exchange allows us to identify with others and their situation in the world.

To this basic distinction we add another. *Commitment to the person*, in CMPT, designates the tendency to construct person-based perspectives, to emphasise the role of personal attributes in what the other thinks, feels, and does. On the contrary, commitment to the situation involves constructing context-sensitive perspectives, whereby the situation the other is considered fundamental for the way they think, feel, and act. This distinction has obvious parallels with the one between dispositional and situational attributions in attribution theories and, in this regard, interesting connections can be made between ‘taking’ and ‘attributing’ perspectives. In the perspective taking literature, Batson, Early and Salvarani (1997) also pointed to the difference between person and situation-based perspectives, more precisely between ‘imagining how another feels’ and ‘imagining how you would feel’. In other words, when operating with a commitment to similarity, as explained above, one can either identify with the other (in a symbolic sense, become other) or identify with the situation of the other (imaginatively considering how he or she would feel in the other’s situation). The same distinction can help us identify two sub-types of perspective taking in cases of commitment to difference.

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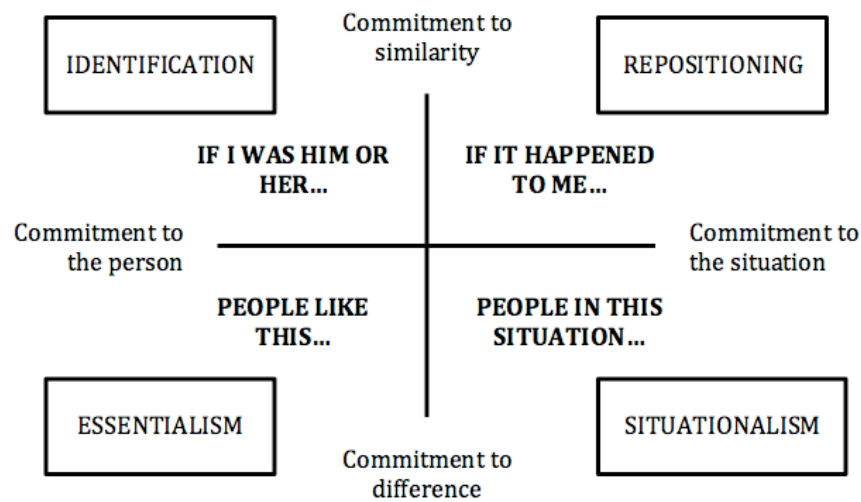


Figure 1. The Commitment Model of Perspective Taking

In light of the two axes discussed here we propose four types of perspective taking based on their sub-processes (see Figure 1). They are defined as follows: *identification* (commitment to similarity and the person), *repositioning* (commitment to similarity and the situation), *essentialism* (commitment to difference and the person), and *situationalism* (commitment to difference and the situation). More concretely, in identification the self tries to imagine being the other ('If I was him or her') while, in repositioning, being in the situation of the other ('If it happened to me'), both based on possibilities opened up by position exchange. In essentialist perspective taking, on the other hand, the separation of self–other positions is made clear by defining others based on essentialising categories ('people like this are'), while situationalist perspective taking considers the other's perspective as a result of their situation ('people in this situation are'), in both case without exchanging self–other positions.

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Before illustrating these different types of perspective taking it is important to reflect on their pragmatic consequences. One would be tempted to think that the four processes outlined above can be placed on a continuum ranging from identification at one end, repositioning and situationalism in the middle, and essentialism at the other end in terms of open versus closed to alterity. Indeed, we could expect that identifying with others or their situation cultivates openness and mutual understanding to a higher degree, at least, than using stereotypes to construct the other's perspective. And yet, as Gillespie, Kadianaki and O'Sullivan-Lago (2012, p. 703) rightfully note, "it does not follow that differentiating is in any way connected with being closed unto alterity, and 'sameness' or identification implies being open to alterity".

Taking the perspective of refugees in social media

The examples offered in this article come out of an empirical study of four Internet memes about refugees and associated Reddit comments (a total of 773 entries from seven forums), reported elsewhere (Authors, under review). The data was collected at the end of November 2016 and analysed using both thematic and multivoicedness analysis. The findings point to eight main perspectives of refugees constructed by forum participants and used to argue for or against welcoming them (e.g., aggressors vs. victims, worthless vs. valuable, unethical vs. ethical, and unable vs. able to integrate). For the purposes of this paper, we draw on a few concrete examples in order to illustrate the CMPT and highlight *both* the positive and the negative consequences of each type of perspective taking previously outlined.

We identified perspective taking in this set of data by considering the specific cases in which linguistic indicators signalling the perspective of the other were used

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(e.g., he / she / they believe that... or feel that... or intend to...) as well as those cases in which the formulation of these perspectives was more implicit (e.g., more general representations of the person or group were mobilized but these representations gave an account of how the person or group thinks, feels, etc.). In this sense, there is a deep connection between perspectives of others and representations of others. When taking – in the sense of constructing – the perspective of another person we always use representational (symbolic) elements. However, not all representations of others suggest also their perspective. For instance, representing someone as poor is different than thinking that they will rob another person or become violent. In other words, those representations of others that refer to their mental states (thoughts, emotions, intentions, etc.) not only represent them but also construct their perspective.

Starting with *essentialist perspective taking* it is quite easy to imagine online (and offline) contexts in which people formulate the views of refugees based on ‘the kind of people they are’. Usually grounded in assumptions about the ‘nature’ of different people, essentialism is regularly employed to differentiate oneself and one’s group from others, often in a radical manner. As such, assuming essential differences between self and others tends to close possibilities for identification. In the context of the refugee crisis, this strategy is illustrated by comments like:

Excerpt 1:

“We don’t know who these people are. They don’t need to live in Europe. They can live in camps and then go home when it’s over. Shit, they should stay there and fight. You be compassionate and I’ll be realistic. islam and the west don’t mix. Literally hundreds of millions of muslims are nuts. Assimilation doesn't

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work. I'm all for helping and protecting. I am not for immigration from these lands and these people”

What is distinctive about comments like the one above is the repeated use of “these people”, a phrase meant from the start both to exclude, by inferring a clear difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and homogenise, by legitimising the use of broad categories to refer to actual individuals. In this first excerpt, the perspective of Muslim refugees is that of the mad (“literally hundreds of millions of muslims are nuts”), who will not assimilate (“islam and the west don't mix”). Replying to another user who argued for refugees' rights, this participant also constructs two discursive positions, “compassionate” and “realistic”, and defends his essentialising perspective as basic realism. Objectifying others seems to define forms of perspective taking that exclude them, but is this always the case? Let's consider another excerpt, following a similar logic:

Excerpt 2:

“Take enough humans from any background and one is bound to be a cold blooded killer”

Arguably, this comment illustrates the use of an essentialist assumption about human nature (i.e., it necessarily produces some “cold blooded killers”) to contradict the assumption that refugees might be dangerous simply because many of them are Muslim. While also assuming a degree of commonality between migrants and locals (“take enough humans from any background”), the author of this comment doesn't

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follow the idea of similarity through, at least in this comment thread, by constructing a more humanising refugee perspectives. His or her argument is simply that there will always be risks when engaging with others and this, therefore, is not a valid reason to discriminate against refugees.

Situationalism shares with essentialism the idea that people have pre-determined characteristics but, unlike the latter, these features are attributed to social context. For instance:

Excerpt 3:

“If we accept boatloads of refugees who all share the cultural background of ideological/religious terrorists – and whose religion creates the climate for Wahabbism, which is apparently the root ethos of terrorism in that community – and if previous people we’ve accepted have been led by that ideological background to commit acts of terrorism here in the country that adopted them and gave them shelter – then how can we honestly say that there’s no inherent risk in this?”

In the excerpt above, the user constructs the perspective of refugees based on their “ideological”, “religious” or “cultural” background. This background is assumed to create Wahabbism and, as such, the resulting perspective is that of someone ready to engage in terrorism against the West. If a religion “creates the climate” that is “the root ethos of terrorism”, then the normal course of action is to defend oneself against the newcomers. The perspective of refugees constructed here is made even fouler by the fact that some have been known to “commit acts of terrorism here in the country

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that adopted them and gave them shelter”. Besides being dangerous, refugees are also ungrateful and not above cowardly attacks. Let’s contrast this argument with the following:

Excerpt 4:

“The majority of the Syrian refugees are from the Syrian middle and upper class. They are university students and people closer to a secular and western lifestyle than the faction that has taken over their country. It’s obvious when you look at them, wearing western clothing and communicating with cell phones, as well as the fact that they are somewhat entitled, refusing certain shelters they find beneath their standard. So whatever problems they do bring, radicalism is not one of them. These people want to be Europeans, and will assimilate if we let them”

What we are presented with in this case is the use of situationalism to argue for a more positive view of refugees as educated and wanting to assimilate, perhaps even benefiting their host societies. The situation of refugees is discussed here in markedly different terms than before: instead of Wahabbism and religiously motivated terrorism, refugees are “university students and people closer to a secular and western lifestyle than the faction that has taken over their country”. This is evident for this user in the way they look and act, “wearing western clothing and communicating with cell phones”, being “somewhat entitled, refusing certain shelters they find beneath their standard”. The resulting perspective is of someone who has a more liberal mind-set, more knowledge and skills, and is accustomed to certain standards of living.

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There is almost the potential for identification through recognised similarity here and yet, the remark that “these people want to be Europeans” betrays the emphasis on difference: refugees might look like Europeans and even want to become them, but they are not (unless we let them). While the participant doesn’t continue this logic further, we can infer here assumptions specific for *paternalism*. Others occupy an inferior position but, with some help, could become more like the Europeans they aspire to be. More ‘positive’ – in the sense of open or tolerant – situationalist forms of perspective taking often lead to or encourage paternalistic attitudes towards others.

Perspective taking through *repositioning* shares with situationalism the commitment to context but explicitly emphasises similarity and opens up the possibility of (imaginatively) placing oneself in the situation of the other, in this case of refugees. The comment below, illustrating this mechanism, comes from a participant who was responding to a remark about almost all refugees being ‘fighting age men’ (and thus suspicious as a group of migrants):

Excerpt 5:

“‘Fighting age men’. How old are you and are you male? Would you like it if you went to a foreign country and you were treated as a suspect and referred to as a ‘military aged male’? How the fuck does that make any sense! What happened to innocent until proven guilty!? The fact of the matter is, most Syrian refugees are male because they left their families in refugee camps like These in Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey, countries which are hosting millions despite being poor. Now tell me something, if you were living in one of these camps with your family and were a war refugee and had a fucking terrible life, would you

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not decide to migrate too? Would you not make your way towards a better future and try to ensure a better future for your children?”

In this excerpt, the accusation addressed to refugees of being mainly men who are either too cowardly to fight or represent an army ready to conquer Europe (two inherently contradictory assumptions) is rebuffed through an explicit invitation to reposition: “if you were living in one of these camps with your family and were a war refugee and had a fucking terrible life, would you not decide to migrate too?”. The perspective of refugee men being constructed here is thus one of reasonable and even responsible husbands and fathers, looking to “ensure a better future” for their children. Imagining the situation of refugees and, more than this, imagining oneself in it – something that the author of excerpt 5 arguably does him or herself and asks others to do as well – is meant to prompt reflexivity and inspire a more humane approach to the crisis. The question is: would this invitation be effective? In other words, what happens when we remind others of trying to put themselves in another’s shoes and walk in them for a while? Sometimes their answer might be the one reported below:

Excerpt 6:

“Made this argument [in the context, the argument that denying access to all refugees because some might be dangerous should be remembered when discussing gun control in the US] to some anti immigrant friends today. Didn’t help. Apparently ‘refugees are cowards who won’t stand and fight for themselves like I would’ ... Coming from a cushy middle class white 22 year old

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who plays league all day”

What we observe above is one way in which repositioning can backfire and lead to less rather than more openness towards others. Here we can assume that the “anti immigration friends” tried to put themselves in the situation of refugees but, based on this exercise, concluded that they would “stand and fight for themselves”. Here the perspective of refugees is, again, one of a coward, morally corrupt person. Of course one can argue that the “friends” of this user had their minds made up and didn’t fully engage in repositioning – it was thus easy to misunderstand the actual context of refugees. And yet, they did think of what they would do in the situation and, as such, another way of interpreting their reply is not that they misunderstood what a war involves, but that they might have (also) misjudged their own reaction. If this is the case (and this is what the user implies by telling this story), then a constant danger of repositioning is to wrongly assume your own response to a given situation and, as such, misconstrue the perspective of those living within it.

Last but not least, *identification* is a type of perspective taking that seems, in principle, prototypical for the entire phenomenon. Indeed, most often when we think about perspective taking we assume a process of putting oneself in the position of others, not only in terms of their situation (as in repositioning) but also experientially (i.e., approximating how they would feel within the situation). There was, overall, limited evidence of this process at work within the Internet forums we studied and, unfortunately, actual instances of perspective taking through identification might be rarer generally due to a number of factors. First of all, it is quite effortful, cognitively or perceptually, to try to become ‘other’ and, second, it can also be quite taxing

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affectively (especially if the other is a refugee or someone going through a highly traumatic experience). Moreover, engaging in this kind of perspective taking requires reflexivity in the Meadean sense of being capable of seeing oneself from the perspective of another person. Excerpt 7 below comes from the same user quoted in excerpt 5 and it was formulated in response to the participant quoted in excerpt 2, the one mentioning “immigration from these lands and these people”:

Excerpt 7:

“See I find this quite problematic because I think you are generalising quite a bit and not treating each person as an individual. Individualism which is a cornerstone of the West which you seek to protect. I have already provided you with a poll that clearly states that most Syrians are not religious fundamentalists (80% - 85% of them) and they are as conservative as Americans on average. Why then such rhetoric of ‘these people’ and ‘these lands’ as if it's one giant monolithic entity with no individual human beings and instead one enormous hive mind? I notice your username [indicating that the interlocutor is Irish], do you remember that immigrants of your people were demonized not long ago in the United States because of their Catholic religion? It was projected by ‘serious thinkers’ that the Irish with their allegiance to the Pope would change the evangelical/protestant United States. It was projected that the Irish would bring down the average intelligence of the country. Funny, the group to be demonized now has changed but the rhetoric has remained exactly the same”

Here we find not only an eloquent argument against essentialism but also a

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double effort to promote perspective taking through identification. First, the participant sets the stage for position exchange by providing evidence that “most Syrians are not religious fundamentalists (80% - 85% of them) and they are as conservative as Americans on average”. In other words, most refugees are, presumably, quite similar to the people writing on the forum. Second, the author of this comment makes reference to the other participant’s username and reminds him “that immigrants of your people were demonized not long ago in the United States because of their Catholic religion”. More than this, he or she points to the fact that there is an even deeper possibility of identification with refugees for the other participant since not only both might share the experience of victimhood, but even the discourses used to stigmatise refugees now were used in the past to demonise Irish Catholics. What would the perspective of refugees look like for a person who understands that he or she shares a deep and meaningful bond with members of this group? Just as in the previous cases, perspective taking through identification can lead to a variety of outcomes, both positive and negative. For instance:

Excerpt 8:

“I can expect it [for refugees to assimilate] because they already have done so. They left their Arab home for a western one which itself is a profound change in lifestyle. If I were to move to Egypt, I wouldn’t convert to Islam, but I would strive to dress in a way the locals dress and learn their language and customs as soon as possible. I left mine behind when I decided to move to another land. Expecting them to change to fit me is [not] arrogant and selfish”

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This excerpt starts from a case of repositioning: “If I were to move to Egypt, I wouldn't convert to Islam, but I would strive to dress in a way the locals dress and learn their language and customs as soon as possible”. The participant assumes, correctly or not, that moving to an Arab country, he or she would try hard to assimilate, within limits (defined here by religion). What follows points however to a process of identification: “I left mine behind when I decided to move to another land”. Whether this user was him or herself a migrant is debatable and impossible to conclude from this quote (or others from this user in the same thread). However, the use of “I” here suggests that, even momentarily, identification occurred between the position of the self and that of the refugees. The pragmatic outcome of this exercise is the construction of two perspectives, that of the ‘good’ and that of the ‘bad’ migrant. The former involves wanting to adapt to the new culture. The other, and this is the implicit accusation addressed to current migrants, is the perspective of someone who doesn't want to change his or her lifestyle, wants to dress differently and don't learn the language and customs of the locals. This, the user concludes, is not “arrogant and selfish” to expect of migrants – a recently performed act of identification proves it!

What can we conclude from these examples? The CMPT is a viable model allowing us to make useful analytic distinctions within a naturally occurring set of data. However, different kinds of perspective taking might not be as clear-cut in real life as they are in theory. Essentialism, situationalism, repositioning and identification are not mutually exclusive and one can emerge from or lead to the other (see, for instance, the possibilities for identification brought about by situationalist perspective taking in the fourth excerpt, or the move between repositioning and identification in the last one). Second, and related to the above, perspective taking needs to be studied

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dialogically not only in terms of its underlying dynamic between the real and/or imagined positions of self and other, but also in terms of its context of production. It can be argued that online forum comments are necessarily embedded in chains of communication but this is equally true of all instances in which we try to understand ourselves and others. Perspective taking doesn't only capture the social nature of our minds – its study necessarily points us to the *social and interactional contexts* in which perspectives are forged, taken, dismissed, and used to influence others (see also Krauss & Fussell, 1991). This last point is important to underline when it comes to refugees since, at least in online forums and, we would say, in the case of most Europeans, the perspective of refugees is shaped by interactions with co-nationals and rarely, if ever, with actual refugees.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper we outlined the Commitment Model of Perspective Taking, a framework firmly grounded within sociocultural and particularly pragmatist approaches to this phenomenon. We then applied it to one of the biggest current societal challenges, the refugee crisis, raising the question of *how* members of Western countries take the perspective of migrants. The model postulates two main types of perspective taking processes based on a commitment to similarity with refugees (opening up the possibility of position exchange) or difference (leading to position fixity). This basic distinction is nuanced further by adding a concern for the person versus his/her context. The four resulting types of perspective taking – essentialism, situationalism, repositioning, and identification – illustrate not only different processes but lead to different pragmatic outcomes. Importantly though, these outcomes need to be

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considered *contextually* as each process can in fact be used to promote tolerance and openness or, on the contrary, closed and discriminatory attitudes. In this final section, we reflect on 1) whether the CMPT can be applied more widely, beyond the case of distant, marginalised others, and 2) on the practical consequences we can derive from using this model for understanding and supporting refugees.

Regarding the first question, it is tempting to assume that our model applies best to situations in which we interact with less familiar or collective others, particularly members of groups that are distant from us, geographically and/or culturally. For individual and familiar others, for example our relatives, friends and co-workers, we are rarely left in the position of imagining their perspective on the world – by communicating with them we get a fairly good idea about their feelings and views. What we would argue in these cases is that, although the processes we made reference to above might have a different dynamic (e.g., identification might take place in a recurrent, almost unnoticeable fashion; essentialism would be used more rarely since we tend to individualise the people we care about, etc.), they still apply to familiar others. This is because the use of existing representations and position exchange permeates self–other relations and captures something essential about the self’s efforts to understand others and their experience. In fact, it might be more useful to use another distinction rather than ‘close’–‘distant’, ‘collective’–‘individual’ others and refer to moments in which we take for granted our understanding of other people and moments in which this assumption breaks down and, even in our most intimate relations, we are left wondering about why the other person acts the way he or she does. The CMPT is well equipped to theorise the latter, which include *cultural encounters* such as the one prompted by the refugee crisis.

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What can we learn from such contexts that could help us understand and assist those who escape war-torn countries?

First of all, the situation of refugees and the way it is discussed at least on social media shows that people use different processes to construct the perspective of others and do so deliberately and interactively. Although the voice of refugees themselves is rarely if ever ‘heard’ on these forums – there was only one instance in our data in which a user shared a video showing refugees talking – participants do have access to a diversity of perspectives coming from other people. However, as we know from previous studies, a plurality of views and representations doesn’t necessarily lead to more reflexivity and openness towards others. As Tsirogianni and Andreouli (2011, p. 5.6) note, “rather, there is a fundamental tension in self–other relations between recognition and lack of recognition”. In inter-group situations characterised by a highly unequal distribution of power and when dystopian scenarios associated with welcoming refugees stimulate strong collective emotions, it is not hard to see an increase in intolerance and fear of the other. Acknowledging existing differences, even fundamental ones, between some of the refugees and some local communities is not the culprit here; it is over-generalising these differences, making them absolute and diminishing the values of others that risks *de-humanising* them, while losing the sense of our own humanity in the process.

There are no easy solutions for contexts such as this one. On the long term, as suggested by Sammut, Daanen and Moghaddam (2013, p. 1) we should aim to learn to facilitate “a meaningful exchange of fundamental ideas and beliefs between different cultural groups”. There is little contact or real exchanges taking place with refugees at a societal level unfortunately. Perhaps one of the most direct implications

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of the CMPT, in the short term, is to make us aware of how we come to understand others and their experiences and, most of all, the consequences of our efforts. For some, this model and the examples in this paper imply that we should foster identification and re-positioning and hinder situationalism and especially essentialism in perspective taking; for example, in how we educate children at school about refugees. Our belief though is that what we need is to encourage a critical reflection on how we construct the perspective of others by asking questions such as: What assumptions about the other are mobilised when taking perspectives from the ‘outside’? Importantly, what assumptions about the self underpin perspectives of others constructed from the ‘inside’? If perspective taking is deeply linked to *self-reflection*, it might be useful to consider, individually and collectively, not only how we take the perspective of others but also what these processes say about us, the selves we are, the selves we are becoming, and the selves we would like to be.

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