

# How do you recognise a refugee?

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## This study analyses qualitatively and quantitatively the ideas German children and adolescents have about refugees.

Omar: The refugee totally flipped out in the street car.

Teacher: And how did you know he was a refugee?

Omar: It was obvious, he had dark skin. (Teacher hesitates because Omar himself has a “darker” skin tone)

Another student then says: Like you?

Omar: (pauses in thought)

In the study series “How children and adolescents understand the topic of refugees”, several times we heard statements according to which supposed refugees had done this or that. More than once the question arose: Why do they presume that someone is a refugee? The Geneva Convention on Refugees states that refugees are people who have a justified fear of persecution for religious, ethnic, or political reasons and therefore have to flee the country in which they live. It is persecution and a lack of protection from the system that make a person into a refugee, not any outward appearances.

And yet, in the discussions during the study and the lesson units it quickly became clear that children and adolescents believe they can identify them as such just by looking at them. This indicates that there is an internal image of a “refugee” that is linked to certain characteristics (markers). In a study by the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) and the Media Authority of North Rhine-Westphalia (LfM), we approached first exploratively, then on a representative level what these characteristics typically are. In a creative process we asked n = 129

adolescents (13-17 years old) to draw and describe a refugee and to imagine what kinds of thoughts they might have. In order to understand age and gender tendencies, a representative sample of n = 1,448 children and adolescents (between 6 and 19 years) were asked the following open question: “How do you recognise a refugee?”<sup>1</sup> All given answers were transcribed and then categorised.

## HOW DO YOU RECOGNISE A REFUGEE?

“Refugees usually have darker skin, they don’t speak German very well yet, and they are usually thin and have brown eyes. Women are usually completely veiled.” (Erika, 13 years old)

When children and adolescents are explicitly asked how they recognise a refugee, 4 out of 10 immediately referred to the language spoken with typical statements like “they speak German poorly”, “don’t speak German yet”, or “they speak another language”. For those who have already played with or spoken to refugees, the number was slightly above the average.

The respondents also pointed toward physical characteristics, most often dark skin, “that they’re browner” (Jovanka, 14 years old), or made a statement of gener-

al foreignness: “that they look different than Germans, for example” (Christina, 13 years old). Many also mentioned a dark skin tone or make statements like: “They look like normal foreigners.” (Luisa, 15 years old) 1 in 5 named clothing as a key characteristic: “They usually wear clothes that don’t fit right or don’t match” (Bernadette, 15 years old) or they assumed that refugees did not have many clothes. Head scarves or veils as a characteristic of refugees (Ill. 1, left) is named primarily by those who have not had direct contact with refugees. The hijab is thus shown to be a stigma that dominates the internal images especially if no real contact has taken place (Kreutzer, 2015). The image of “the other” is therefore mostly determined by a “different” language and “different” appearance. This means that there is an implicitly assumed homogeneity that characterises German citizens as only those who speak German, have many and good clothes, and are ethnically “Caucasian white”. This



Ill. 1: Erika and Alisa (both 13 years old) draw their ideas of refugees

Category	Sub-category	Percentage
Language 40.4%	Poor/no German	25.6%
	Another language	8.1%
	Language (neutral)	7.5%
Physical characteristics 37%	Dark skin	16.6%
	Look different	14.4%
	Dark hair	7.3%
	Like other foreigners	3.3%
Clothing 19%	Clothing (neutral)	8.3%
	Old/bad/poor clothing	6.0%
	Poor/don't have many things	4.6%
	Head scarf/veiled	3.2%
Behaviour 23.9%	Afraid/intimidated	4.2%
	Always in large groups	4.1%
	Different behaviour	3.7%
	Don't know Germany/ the German culture	2.2%
Can't tell/ can barely tell		12.9%
Don't know (exactly)		10.9%

Ill. 2: "How do you recognise a refugee?" – open answers proportionally, n = 1,448 (6 to 19 years old), selection, multiple answers possible

clearly overlooks the existing diversity in languages, resources, and ethnicities among other factors, a blindness discussed under the term "critical whiteness" (including Pech, 2006). It also indicates the often missing overarching historical perspective in the public discourse (cf. El-Tayeb, 2016). Another typical marker that children and adolescents use to determine their internal image of refugees is a series of certain behaviours (Ill. 2). Linda (14 years old) was sure that one characteristic to recognise refugees is: "They always hang out in places where there are a lot of people." Sometimes even militaristic vocabulary was included in statements like: "Somehow they always seem to be in troops. I've never seen a refugee alone" (Anjuschka, 13 years old). Those who have already had direct contact with refugees often listed "friendly" and "like to play with us" as typical behaviours. A small group said aggressiveness, unfriendliness, or

is defined by persecution and threat to life, such as the 14-year-old secondary school pupil Adrian: "You can't tell by looking at someone if they fled from war and violence or not." In a few exceptional cases, individual pupils even stated their justified protest against the question: "I don't think this question is right. A refugee is not someone who has certain characteristics. There are a lot of different types. Some have darker skin, some are light. They already have a hard enough time here, and prejudices don't help them." (Paul, 10 years old) In total, around 13 % of the respondents gave answers such as "I don't think you can recognise refugees, they're just normal people!" (Jumina, 13 years old) These kinds of answers were stated significantly more often by pupils who already had personal contact with refugees (17 %).<sup>2</sup> Real encounters therefore seem to be a promising approach for breaking down stigmas and prejudices.

crossing boundaries were typical behaviours for refugees because "they bring unrest and grab women even though they're not allowed to do that" (Simon, 9 years old) or: "They often act very aggressively and want more than they have a right to." (Manuela, 13 years old) Only very few come up with the appropriate answer that "refugee" as a status cannot be recognised by someone's appearance but

## GRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS OF REFUGEES

When adolescents draw refugees, they often imagined them as male, frequently with brown hair colour and a beard like Camilla (13 years old), who drew a young man with black hair gelled to stick up, large, brown eyes, and thick eyebrows. With pencil circles she hinted at a beard (Ill. 3). In our sample only a few girls drew female refugees. Some gave their refugee "oriental" characteristics. Others, especially the girls who came from a migrant background themselves, drew women with head scarves. What is striking in the 129 pictures is the facial expression, which is usually sad or confused; in a few cases there are also tears and injuries. The clothing of the refugees is often drawn as torn, in some cases as brand clothing, and in very few drawings smart phones are depicted.

## REFUGEES' THOUGHTS

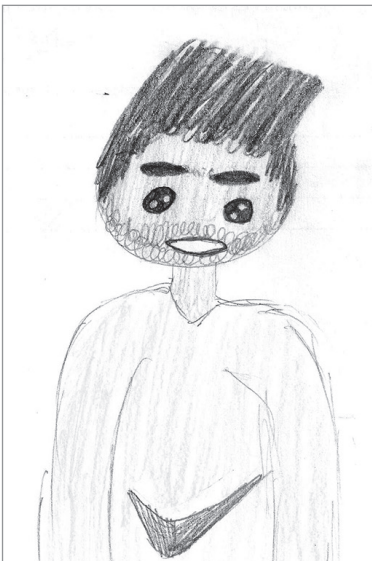
In the explorative study we asked 129 adolescents to imagine the thoughts of a refugee and to write them down into 2 empty thought bubbles (see e.g. back cover).

The most frequently imagined thoughts (one-third of the youth) were those about family and worries about their own family, e.g. Jens (16 years old): "I'm worried about my family. What if they didn't make it? I need to find them and help them!"

In many cases, the youth linked these worries about their family with the desire to bring them to Germany. In individual cases the yearning for family, friends and their home country was linked to the feeling of loneliness like Susanne (16 years old) who wrote:

"Here everything is so different. Everyone dresses differently and it's not at all like at home. I'm happy that I'm safe now. But I miss my family and my country."

The youth can therefore well imagine that the separation from friends and



Ill. 3: For Camilla (13 years old) the typical refugee is a young man with black hair gelled to stick up, large brown eyes, thick eyebrows, and a beard

relatives is something that refugees think about a lot and that they hope they can live together with them again.

The second most frequently imagined thought referred to the hope that the war in their home country would end and the refugees could return.

One-third of our informants imagined their refugees thinking of hope for a better life in Germany, sometimes in combination with doubts:

“Will I be better off in Germany? Will I make friends here? Will I find a job? Will I ever see my family again? How should I communicate? Can I go to school? Will I find somewhere to live? Will I even get asylum?” (Liana, 16 years old)

These are questions of an assumed insecurity that is also expressed by the many question marks drawn in the thought bubbles.

In a few cases, freeloading thoughts were imagined such as 17-year-old Natalya (with an Argentinian migrant background):

“Unfortunately I have to learn German here and I don’t feel like integrating. Besides that, here I can do whatever I want because they won’t throw me out anyway (e.g. theft, robbery). Luckily I’m here and not at home. Here

I can get unemployment benefits and see some pretty women.”

And very few girls also imagined macho thoughts like Linda (14 years old), who wrote in her thought bubble: “That babe’s mine.” These are the exceptions, however.

Just as seldom did the informants imagine experiences during flight and in the camps, the dangers, and loss of loved ones and their own things. A few adolescents could imagine that the refugees struggle with their fate: “Why me? Why my country? Why does there have to be war?” (Anna-Lena, 15 years old).

When the youth imagine the refugees’ thoughts, they are for the most part extremely empathetic and imagine primarily worried, fearful thoughts. It tends to be victim attitudes that in individual cases – and only in individual cases – can turn into a criminal perspective. What they can hardly imagine is a positive optimism, a joy of things that they had previously been denied such as education and freedom of movement, and the deep desire to become a valuable member of society (see also Götz, Baxter & Pütz in this issue).

## CONCLUSION

In response to the question “How do you recognise a refugee?” 11 % of the children and adolescents remarked “I don’t know”, 13 % gave the correct response that you cannot know by looking at people who is a refugee and who is not. Most, however, stated characteristics with which they believe they can identify people as “refugees”. Without realising it, they assume a uniformity of “the Germans” in their language, skin and hair colour, clothing style, and behaviour and notice a deviation from these assumed norms. They characterise the perceived “others” as speaking another language and/or having poor German skills, dark skin and hair colour, mismatched clothing,

and various behaviours. It is images of “the other” that are based on stereotypes which make up differences, separate, and only reflect the diverse reality among refugees and German society to a limited degree. Actively grappling with these stereotypes and comparing them with reality would be a worthy starting point for pedagogical processes of education, and direct encounters prove to be particularly valuable here. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Carried out by Iconkids & Youth in the context of the survey on multiple topics in September 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Without encounters with refugees 10.5 %.

## REFERENCES

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