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The afraid create the fear: perceptions of refugees by 'gün' groups in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perceptions of the local female population towards displaced Syrians in Turkey. The research is based on the analysis of data from participant observation and discourse analysis of conversations in five 'gün' groups, which are informal, social, and fairly regular gatherings of local women, in Mersin in Spring 2018. Five common discursive patterns are identified: stereotyping, biased perceptions, 'us' vs. 'them', scapegoating, and discrimination. We conclude that local women's discourses reveal marginalisation and discursive exclusion of displaced Syrians in Turkey, and argue that such othering originates not only from existing cultural differences, language barriers, and lack of trust, but also from lack of sustained social interaction between these groups. Further studies should facilitate both knowledge sharing about the additional vulnerabilities such attitudes create for displaced people and potential paths for meaningful engagement between local community members and forcibly displaced people.

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The problem is solved in their country. Why don't they leave Turkey? Someone shared it on social media; I liked it a lot: Our boys are going to die fighting for Syria. Syrians are coming here to constantly reproduce.

— *Parents Group member*

Introduction

Turkey has been receiving Syrians fleeing the conflict since April 2011 through an open border policy and identified Syrians as 'guests' and 'vulnerable' groups in dire need of safety. As the number of 'guests' approach 4 million in 2019 and with no end to the conflict in sight, the atmosphere of public compassion towards displaced Syrians in Turkey has begun to dissipate (AFAD 2014;

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Akgündüz, van den Berg, and Hassink 2015; Çağaptay and Bilge 2014; ICG 2018; MAZLUMDER 2015; Hrant Dink Foundation 2017; Erdogan 2018). Most studies on displaced Syrians in Turkey have examined the sources of increasing hostility towards displaced Syrians by focusing on the impact of the prolonged stay on host societies (Achilli 2015; Dahi 2014). Similarly, studies have explored the impact of their presence on ethnic, political, social, and demographic transformation in the country and discuss accompanying policy challenges (Çağaptay and Bilge 2014; İçduygu 2015; Orhan and Gündoğar 2015). Accordingly, some scholars suggest the rising social disapproval towards displaced Syrians in Turkey is a consequence of an emphasis on 'generosity' and not 'rights' when presenting humanitarian policies (Özden 2013, 5). Portraying displaced Syrians as 'guests' dependent on the 'generosity' of host societies may have emphasised the temporariness of these people's presence in the eyes of the receiving community. When explaining the increasing hostility towards displaced persons, understanding the frustrations of the host community over the prolonged stay may constitute a necessary condition. However, it is far from sufficient to understand the multifaceted psychosocial processes that instigate antagonism in the first place. The present study examines how and why negative perceptions towards displaced Syrians form in the local context in Turkey through the lens of local women's discourses about them, analysing their conversations and social context in semi-private women-only gatherings called 'gün' (or 'day') groups.

As a country in the 'classical belt of patriarchy' (Kandiyoti 1988), Turkey accommodates a variety of traditionally and historically constructed women-only intimate social spaces such as 'gün' groups. These are distinct venues for understanding the development of perceptions and attitudes towards displaced Syrians because they constitute relatively consistent, semi-private social occasions for local women, understood to be the key agents in everyday life (Sirman 1995; Beşpınar 2010; Akyüz et al. 2019). By observing interactions and analysing conversations within 'gün' groups, this study seeks to identify the context and discourses which shape local women's views in the 'social space that motivates people to interact' (Zapata-Barrero 2016) regularly. As such, the study addresses a theoretical and empirical gap in the literature by presenting an analytical account of the semi-private narratives of local communities. The paper begins with a discussion on theories studying the link between language and power, and the significance of understanding the context and discourse for identity formation, as well as the role of intergroup contact on shaping perceptions and attitudes towards foreigners. The methodology is followed by discussion of the significance of 'gün' groups as analytical spaces for observing the sources of local women's perception formation. After presenting the findings, the paper concludes with a discussion of the multifaceted dynamics of othering processes and recommends further study of local contexts in communities receiving mass influx.

Discourse, context and identity formation

The present study combines Bakhtin's dialogical approach to language with van Dijk's theory of context and discourse, and examines the question of how identities are (re)shaped in everyday life.

Bakhtin (1981) perceived language as evolving, changing, and developing in the sense that every discourse hides various intentions, in particular considerations of power and authority (Good 2002), about which even the person speaking may not be aware. Identity is shaped through the interaction between Self and Other (Holquist 2002; Taylor 1994), and dialogism provides the 'social location' of a discursive relationship between these entities, shaped by factors such as religion, ethnicity, location, socioeconomic status, and culture. However, delineating the processes leading to identity formation requires an understanding of the link between text and social context as 'the relevant environment of language use' (Van Dijk 2009, 3).

Van Dijk's emphasis on the relationship between context and language is central to this research as the discourses of the 'gün' group members take place within that social and situational context. The members are in a dialogical interaction where their conversations on Syrian displaced persons evoke identity formation, despite their seeming lack of awareness that they, as the Self, have social and situational power over the Other, the displaced Syrians. Understanding how the members think and talk about the displaced people every day and 'how they persuasively communicate their ethnic attitudes to other members of their own group' (Van Dijk 1987, 7) is crucial for exploring the reproduction of marginalisation in everyday life.

To be able to exist and fulfil itself, the Self requires the Other (Langer 1981). The Other as the object is continually (re)created as 'they' and 'them' by the Self (Bhabha 1994; Said 1978; Spivak 1999). The process of drawing the boundary between 'we' and 'they' is called othering (Jensen 2011; Riggins 1997). Through discursive exchanges, the subordination of the Other becomes legitimate, and the identity of the subordinate groups are (re)formed in the gaze of powerful groups. In the process of othering, differentiation, and exclusion are carried out by perceiving the Other as passive and weak (Spivak 1985). The division between 'we' and 'they' is constructed through emphases on cultural differences as 'we', civilised, cultivated, superior, and benevolent; and 'they', uncivilised, primitive, and morally inferior (Baumann 2006). These identity markers are the main instruments of drawing the discursive boundaries between 'we' and 'they' and shaping the Other's identity through a 'dualistic process of differentiation and demarcation' (Lister 2004, 101).

Stereotypes, as another component of exclusion and othering, are constructed through unequal power relations between a marginalised group and a dominant group that 'speaks of and for [the] marginalised group, thereby

reinforcing the marginalised position of the latter' (van Es 2017, 3). Even though some stereotypes are occasionally based on one's own observation or social interaction, most are formed through hearsay, personal stories, and the media.

Studies explain othering and exclusion processes emerging in the social interaction between majority and minority groups through two main approaches: ethnic competition theory and intergroup contact theory (Savelkoul et al. 2011). Ethnic competition theory suggests that the competition, which can be perceived or actual, between dominant and marginalised groups leads to biased perceptions and hostility (Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002; Bobo 1988). Intergroup contact theory claims that social contact between such groups reduces biased and negative perceptions (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). The formation of positive attitudes towards out-groups is premised upon in-group distancing facilitated through the experience of cross-group contact (Pettigrew 1997). Studies continue to question under what conditions in-group identification could be reduced and how this, in turn, may impact positive attitudes towards out-groups (Kauff et al. 2016).

Both competition theory and intergroup contact theory propose examining the dynamics of cross-group contact, which in turn may explain the formation of positive or negative attitudes towards out-groups. The present study, however, suggests studying the (semi-private) context of in-group identification, and inquiring into the conditions under which 'prejudiced people avoid intergroup contact' (Pettigrew 1998). The claim here is that enhanced in-group identification through participation in the discourse and context of intimate settings reinforce prejudice to an extent that any cross-group contact is precluded. Therefore, before theorising about the impact of cross-group contact on the formation of hostile attitudes towards out-groups, researchers need to further investigate the effects of regular intimate contacts and conversations in one's 'own' group on the intensification of negative perceptions about 'other' groups. Semi-private local contexts such as 'gün' groups may serve as social spaces for 'derogating others' through affirming the image of the Self (Fein and Spencer 1997). Combined with lack of, or very limited, cross-group contact with out-group members, the context and discourse in these settings may steer perceptions among the self-constructed 'us' of imagined 'others' in a negative direction.

Methodology

This research is based on data collected from conversations among forty-five female participants in five different 'gün' groups in Mersin, Turkey, through participant observation. As a city with low cost of living and a mild climate, Mersin attracted many displaced Syrians of different socio-economic backgrounds. It also attracted high-income business groups due

to trade opportunities with a commercial port on the Mediterranean Sea (Orhan and Gündoğar 2015). In November 2019, the number of Syrian displaced persons residing in Mersin was 205,473 or 11.32 percent of the civic population (GİGM 2019).

The sample of 'gün' groups consist of women representing different age brackets and socioeconomic backgrounds from different neighbourhoods in Mersin. They are classified according to how the group members themselves identify their affiliation with each other: *friends and acquaintances*, *hemşehriler*,¹ *kinswomen*, *neighbours*, and *parents*. In the *friends and acquaintances* group, there are six members, who are all housewives, aged 46–65. The *hemşehriler* group includes thirteen women aged 52–66, including seven retirees, five housewives, and a teacher. The *kinswomen* group consists of twelve women aged 49–70, including eight housewives, three retirees, and a manager. The *neighbours* group has seven members aged 21–50, including a hairdresser, a lawyer, a college student, a housewife, a teacher, and an insurance broker. The *parents* group has seven members aged 49–65, including six housewives, and one retiree.

The research sites – the 'gün' groups – were accessed through social networks of the local female researcher who facilitated contact with the gatekeepers of different 'gün' groups through snowball sampling. When entering these semi-private social settings with restricted access, the local female researcher performed all expected routines, including performing proper greetings, giving a brief explanation of her presence in the setting, and staying for the whole duration of the 'gün' group session, following natural flow of time in the setting as observer and as participant. Familiarity with the local setting increased the capacity of the researcher to deconstruct nonverbal communication during the social interactions such as body language, eye contact, intonations, silences, and facial expressions. The researcher noted during which remarks the 'gün' group members made eye contact with the researcher as well as when they observed an approving silence, or shared subtle sympathetic gestures.

The participant observation process was designed to account for the possible challenges of taking field notes and identifying recurring themes. During the 'gün' group meetings, the researcher freely noted the conversations and interactions, including the non-verbal communication. To ensure validity, the authors reflected on debriefing notes together on three separate occasions, verifying the quotes, the notes on non-verbal communication, and the contexts and composition of the different 'gün' groups. For triangulation of emerging recurrent themes and patterns, we also compared the observations and findings with data on perceptions of local communities from publicly available survey data and social and print media.

The 'gün' groups provide a 'social space' for the members to talk about their daily lives and private matters. In the presence of the researcher, the

members attempted to dialogically interact with other group members through asking approval-seeking questions such as: 'Is there any other such injustice as while my son cannot find a job, the Syrians are able to work cheaply?'; 'I am a citizen of this country, am I not?'; and 'They [the displaced Syrians] are getting child benefits from the government. Is there any such benefit for us?' The 'gün' group meetings mostly began with the sharing of some uncaring comments about the displaced Syrians and transformed into heated exchanges of harsh opinions with raised voices, except for the meeting of the *friends and acquaintances* group which, unlike other 'gün' groups, meets in a café or a restaurant.

The conversations were examined through critical discourse analysis, which acknowledges 'a direct link between discourse and society (or culture)' (Van Dijk 2014, 121). Wodak and Meyer (2009, 2) list common dimensions in critical discourse analysis: 'an interest in the properties of "*naturally occurring*" language use by real language users', 'a focus on *larger units than isolated words and sentences* and, hence, new basic units of analysis: texts, discourses, conversations, speech acts, or communicative events' and 'the extension of linguistics *beyond sentence grammar* towards a study of action interaction' (original emphasis). Van Dijk (2003) defines the dimensions of critical discourse analysis as power and access, where power is created through social interactions within groups. The characteristics of the 'gün' context (setting, participants, and circumstances) identify the authority of the discourse in a relationship between the *Self*/*'gün'* group participants, and the *Other*/Syrian displaced persons.

'Gün' groups as key 'social locations' for forming perceptions

The term 'gün' has been used interchangeably with 'altın günü' (gold day), 'paralı gün' (money day), 'şeker günü' (sugar day), and 'kabul günü' (reception day or invitation day) (Ekal 2006; Khatip-Chahidi 1995; Ozbay 1999; Sonmez et al. 2010; Wolbert 1996). Those who participate in the 'gün', which usually takes place in a member's home, constitute women-only 'tiny publics' (Fine 2012), and are crucial for female interaction and socialisation in Turkey. 'Gün' groups' interactions create a certain degree of power that constructs social rights and privileges, triggers processes of change, founds formal and informal hierarchies, and shapes the social discourses, norms, and identities in the daily lives of these women. Benard and Mize (2016) pointed out that social boundaries are usually reinforced by groups establishing negative and positive stereotypes towards out-groups that can operate as a basis for group cohesion. Some of the predominantly targeted groups are minority groups and foreigners since they are considered to belong to a culture other than the mainstream. 'Gün' groups follow this pattern of confirming group membership by marking group boundaries through the othering of displaced Syrians.

Conducting research on perceptions formed in the ‘gün’ groups also reveals their function as ‘building blocks of society’ which have hitherto received limited attention in the literature (Ekal 2006; Khatip-Chahidi 1995; Sonmez et al. 2010; Wolbert 1996). The present study particularly focuses on ‘gün’ groups because, through these dedicated social occasions, women create a ‘social location’ which refers to ‘persons’ positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based, and other socially stratifying factors’ (Mahler and Pessar 2001, 445). In this social location, rather than being subjects of (re)formation and diffusion of collective knowledge (Barroso and Bruschini 1991), women function as key agents of everyday life (Kabeer 2002; Abu-Lughod 2009) who reciprocally then (re)shape perceptions of members of out-groups in society through dialogical interaction with one another. Moreover, comparing perception formation processes in diverse groups of women in different parts of a city enables us to account for heterogeneity within receiving local communities. In the ‘gün’ group context, members (re)construct the moving identities of the out-group members in everyday life. As such, the discursive social power the ‘gün’ groups hold in everyday (re)production of marginalisation in society and in identity (re)formation of the out-groups/Syrian displaced persons is critical in explaining the sources of negative attitudes, especially those formed by women.

Reinforcing negative perceptions ‘together’ in intimate settings

The marginalisation discourses in ‘gün’ groups emerge without, or with very limited, actual social contact with displaced Syrians. In order to justify their lack of social contact with the displaced Syrians, ‘gün’ group members note that these people have not honoured their own nation and have deserted their homeland instead of fighting for it and hence cannot be trusted. Such a group, in the eyes of the ‘gün’ group members, constitutes a *threat* to the security of the receiving communities. By abandoning *their* homeland and people in distress, it is supposed that *these* people have shown that *they* would not have any concern for the safety of the land and community of those who receive them. Consequently, the justification for social exclusion and ‘othering’ practices towards displaced Syrians by the local communities in general, and ‘gün’ group members in particular, is that they do not deserve to be interacted with because they did not behave honourably towards *their* own people. Discourses in all ‘gün’ groups present chronicles of ‘othering’ based on conscious as well as unconscious assumptions about displaced Syrians. The question of why this is the case remains.

Moreover, the reason most cited by ‘gün’ group members’ for not having social contact with displaced Syrians, even if they wanted contact, is that displaced Syrians are ‘ill-mannered’ and ‘less than respectful towards local

communities' 'ways of life'. Only one of the participants from the *friends and acquaintances* group, who can speak Arabic, stated that she has good relations with her Syrian neighbours. However, she underlined that such good relations have been possible because she is a 'kind' person who makes the effort to connect with 'these' people. She explained that her other Arabic speaking (non-Syrian) neighbours do not interact with them because of 'lack of trust'. She did not explain whether *she* trusts *these* people after her interaction, and did not describe her encounters enthusiastically to introduce a positive turn to the conversation in the group. On the contrary, she preferred to distinguish her experience as unique and attributable to *her* benevolent nature, and attempted to justify other Arabic-speaking neighbours' exclusionary behaviour. In response to her comment, members of the *friends and acquaintances* group did not follow up on her pattern of the story. Her account and the subtle nonverbal communication in her 'gün' group indicate that there are many barriers other than language preventing interaction between the local community and the displaced Syrians. The group exhibited reluctance to engage in any reflection reconsidering their views about social contact with the displaced Syrians, even after one of their *own* group members introduced a relatively positive experience. Such a reaction by the 'gün' group members suggests the depths of the collective anxiety in the local context about cross-group contact with displaced Syrians. In a context of limited, or no, social contact with displaced Syrians, the analysis of the conversations in all 'gün' groups resonate othering processes with 'us' vs. 'them' rhetoric culminating in five exclusionary discursive patterns: stereotyping, biased perceptions, us vs. them, scapegoating, and discrimination.

Stereotyping

To justify their view of displaced Syrians in Mersin as undeserving of social contact, 'gün' members' stereotyping discourse depicted them as 'filthy', 'unreliable', 'immoral', 'greedy', 'too noisy' and 'too fertile'. To corroborate negative assumptions about displaced Syrians, a hairdresser from the *neighbours* group referred to her experience with two Syrian women whom she had hired:

They lie too much. They are dissatisfied with everything ... Plus they love money so much. They love embellishment. They carry other things under their headscarf ... I wouldn't want to take anything from them due to their filthiness.

One member of the *hemşehriler* group voiced her concern about the increasing number of Syrians in Turkey by saying, 'our country has been silently invaded'. By bearing 'too many' children, allegedly in higher numbers than the Turkish population, displaced Syrian women were perceived to be aiming to contribute to outnumbering the local Turkish population, hence threatening the Turkish identity of Mersin and Turkey in the process.

For displaced Syrians, late night meetings, listening to music and dancing may constitute acceptable ways of socialising within their community and establishing some normalcy in their lives. The local community in Mersin, however, finds late-night socialising disruptive and sees routine social interactions by Syrians as taking no account of the social norms of local community life, its conditions, or its social rules (Grabska 2006). A future scenario where Mersin contains more Syrians than Turks, then, was viewed as alarming by a member in the *kinswomen* group who disapproved of how Syrians behave in public:

Syrian women love not working but roaming around and giving birth ... When young [Syrian] ones get into the bus with their headphones on and cell phones in their hands, they don't give their seats to us.² Ours [Turkish young women and men] offer their seats. They are so disrespectful. They speak too loudly and annoy the people around them wherever they go. In our apartment, there are three or four flats [where displaced Syrians reside]. After midnight, they put on some dance music and have fun. We cannot sleep.

Most of the 'gün' group members stressed their fear of displaced Syrians who, for them, are 'violent' and 'aggressive'. One of the most common stories circulated in three 'gün' groups (*friends and acquaintances, neighbours, and hemşehrilere*) was about a Turkish man murdered by his Syrian neighbour over a dispute about noise levels in Mersin.³ Other than this story, however, none of the 'gün' group members cited any personal experience or act of violence involving Syrians.

'Gün' group members labelled displaced Syrian women as 'lacking morals' and as potentially tempting Turkish women's husbands or accepting becoming a second or a third wife through religious ceremonies.⁴ One of the group members, who is originally from Gaziantep,⁵ and currently lives in Mersin, stated that 'when I visit Gaziantep, women talk about their fears, about "whether my husband will take a Syrian wife"'. One member from the *kinswomen* group stated, however, that 'It's a Turkish man's choice to marry a Syrian woman. That's why I don't blame Syrian women in that matter'. Her remark was received by a nonverbal communication of annoyance in the group. 'Gün' group members cited stories about Syrian women's marriage behaviour without ever referring to, or having any knowledge of, marriage statistics between Turkish men and Syrian women. In theory, exogamy may present one way of blending with the local community and leading to social integration by refugees and migrants in the countries of destination (Lee and Boyd 2007). 'Gün' group members, however, perceived displaced Syrian women who marry Turkish men as corrupting Turkish family lives through the introduction of polygamy practices.

Biased perceptions

Through their 'evaluations and impressions' of displaced Syrians, 'gün' group members employed categories which seemed to shape the local community's

stereotype-based judgements about Syrians' traits and behaviours (Macrae and Bodenhausen 2000). Accordingly, categorical social perception by 'gün' group members resulted in biased perceptions about displaced Syrians' traits and behaviour in almost every type of daily encounter. One example of the thinking patterns leading to biased perceptions can be seen in the way one member of the *parents* group presented her encounter with her Syrian neighbour:

For example, my neighbour upstairs ... They're very unprincipled. Especially, Thursday and Friday nights, [Syrian] women gather and do something like a 'gün' meeting. They come with their kids. Imagine ten to fifteen kids are running around inside the house. It's like a kindergarten opened upstairs. Around fifteen days ago, I went up to warn them about the noise. 'They are making too much noise, my head [hurts]' I said, pointing to my aching head. 'It is 9 o'clock' she said. 'Okay, then I am calling the police' I answered. Once she heard about the police, she said 'okay'. But it only lasted one day. Next day, she continued to make noise. You need to warn her on a daily basis.

'Gün' group members had their own interpretations of socially acceptable behaviour and lacked any considerations of mutual respect for the culture of displaced Syrians and/or empathy for their vulnerabilities in the circumstances of displacement. Discourses across 'gün' groups resembled each other remarkably in how the members narrated their encounters with displaced Syrians, irrespective of how limited they were, to confirm their perceptions about Syrians' disrespect to the local communities' 'ways of life'.

Us vs. them

In addition to stereotyping and biased perceptions, 'gün' group members' discourses about displaced Syrians revealed their reinforcement of in-group identification through reference to the categories 'us' vs. 'them'. These discourses resonate with the polarised identity categories of Turks vs. Syrians, depicting the former as superior to the latter and implying that the latter have to abide by the rules set by the former. The emerging pattern in the 'gün' discourses (de)emphasised positive and negative acts and topics about 'us' and 'them' (Van Dijk 2006). A member of the *parents* group, expressed herself in a way that represents the most extreme example of the 'gün' group members' emphasis on superiority of the Self/us over the Other/them, and what this superiority entitles the local community to do:

It does not matter whether you're a guest or a refugee; you have to observe *us* and abide by *our* rules. *We* don't have to live in accordance with *your* rules. Especially those who wander around the street wearing thobes,⁶ I want to set those [thobes] on fire.

The passionate wish 'to set thobes on fire', on the one hand, could represent the potentially extreme behaviour of a 'gün' member (a law abiding, friendly

local woman) to express her contempt for displaced Syrians. The same utterance, on the other hand, could also be a metaphor for a motivation to forcibly remove the symbols of social and cultural difference between the local community and the displaced Syrians, in this case by destruction of the 'thobes'. In either understanding, when considered alongside the expressive body language of the group member and the approving silence of the listening participants, this expression bespoke the intensity of the collective anxiety over living with displaced Syrians that seems to pertain across all 'gün' groups.

Understanding the context within which the *anxiety* and *fear* predominating in the tone of all 'gün' group conversations is crucial in explaining the construction of the image of 'dangerous foreigners' (Vestel 2004). Moreover, the 'Self' validates the exclusion of the 'Others' in emphasising that the 'others' are culturally different from 'us' and that their presence in a given country will inevitably lead to violence and conflict (Wren 2001). As one member of the *neighbours* group explained, 'If I was afraid of the dark streets before *them*, I am now twice as afraid of walking alone on the streets at night. My fear escalated because of *them*'. Various members of different 'gün' groups stressed the 'fear' instigated, or increased, by the presence of displaced Syrians in shared public spaces, which for them was by itself a sufficient reason for excluding them all.

Scapegoating

Scapegoating involves consciously blaming other people for negative incidents and perceiving the scapegoat as threatening (Wodak 1997). Antagonistic accounts of identifying displaced Syrians as *the* cause of the current economic crisis, youth unemployment, poverty, and inequality in Turkey were expressed in all 'gün' groups. One *neighbours* group member's statement was typical of the common concern that displaced Syrians cause unemployment in Turkey:

Unfortunately, while most poor Turkish citizens who depend on daily earnings cannot find a job, Syrians work everywhere for half pay. They earn a living without qualifying (legally) to be in the labour market. They are exempted from taxation. The employers prefer hiring two Syrians instead of taking out social insurance and paying 2000 Turkish Liras for one Turkish employee.

Only one member from the *kinswomen* group stated that she, instead, blamed 'Turkish employers. If they employed you, they'd have to pay you 100 TL while paying Syrians 20 TL. It's against human rights'. Other 'gün' group members seemed to be convinced that, if there is indeed an economic crisis, it is because displaced Syrians continue to live in Turkey.

One member of the *neighbours* group expressed her fears about the impact of so many displaced Syrians in Mersin: 'after their [Syrians'] arrival, the housing prices reached a peak. Both for houses for rent and houses for sale ... There is an incredible density [of displaced Syrians] in the city. Mersin has changed so much. We've become puny, they've become enormous'. Most 'gün' group members repeated the image of a shrinking local community vis-à-vis an increasing Syrian population in their city, thereby accentuating their collective anxiety about losing *their* control over *their* 'own' city.

The discourses in all the 'gün' groups echoed the perception that displaced Syrians are responsible for crime and immorality in the city. One *hemşehriler* group member stated that 'the crime rate has increased because of them [displaced Syrians]. Women are kidnapping children for ransom, didn't you watch that on the news? Robbery, kidnapping, prostitution, these are all committed by *them*'. As with most 'gün' group members' social categorical perceptions, the narrative was not corroborated by any reference to empirical evidence that crime rates had indeed increased with the arrival of displaced Syrians, or, even if they had, whether the extra crimes were actually committed by the displaced Syrians.

Discrimination

Allport defined discrimination as the exclusion of 'members of the group in question from certain types of employment, residential housing, political rights, educational or recreational opportunities, churches, hospitals, or from some other social privileges' (1954, 15). One member of the *kinswomen* group expressed a view common across all 'gün' groups listing the variety of sources of disdain for displaced Syrians and the different acts of discrimination 'gün' group members could exhibit:

We hate them all. They opened a school in the neighbourhood, a Syrian school.⁷ We constantly complained to the municipality until we had the school closed ... We don't have peace anymore. They are dirty. They keep their own culture alive here. I am annoyed. There is this guy walking around with his nightgown in the apartment site nowadays. You know, they have that kind of dress looking like a nightgown [referring to thobe]. He is receiving complaints about his nightgown. You came here, can you see anyone else who is walking around like that? We hate them. I want to set them on fire once I see them. I don't have mercy for them. When I see them on the sidewalk, you should see how I yell at them. 'We don't want you here'. We don't get along with them. They don't speak Turkish. What is there for the employers to do other than underpay them?

One member of the *hemşehriler* group narrated and then justified a case severe of discrimination that had prevented displaced Syrians from renting homes:

I have a house. The realtor called me one day and said that ‘we will rent out your house to Syrians’. I didn’t accept it. There is no dialogue with them. They don’t speak Turkish. If I want to increase the rent, I cannot speak to them on the phone, I cannot sue them when they don’t pay their rents. Why would I rent out to them? I would rent it to my own people even for half price. Besides, if they reside in our apartment building, there would be too many children. Can the children of the apartment communicate with Syrian children? Their language, religion, education, and culture are different. For example, they [other residents] don’t want to allow Syrian children to swim in the pool of the apartment site. A Syrian family rents a house but actually five Syrian families reside in the house.

Common to all discourses of ‘gün’ group members was the validation of the key tenet of situational attribution (Weiner 1986), as they generally explained their own behaviour by referring to the presence of displaced Syrians in the city. Some ‘gün’ group members blamed the supposed intransigence of displaced Syrians for ‘forcing’ local community members to become ‘racists’. One statement from the *parents* group in particular attributed all the consolidating patterns of stereotyping, biased perceptions, us vs. them framing, scapegoating, and discrimination in ‘gün’ group discourses to the presence of the displaced Syrians themselves:

When I was young, the Turks who migrated to Germany would come to visit us. They would tell us that Germans regard them as people that damage Germany. I found it strange at the time, but for the first time, after the Syrians’ arrival, I started to think like the Germans. Racism was something that I don’t like but I forcibly became a racist. They absolutely do not recognise the rules. When people go to other countries, they should observe others and try to comply with them. If you come here, you have to obey the rules.

Another statement by a member of the *hemşehriler* group encapsulated the negative perceptions and the hostile attitudes concealed in the local community:

We don’t host foreigners in *our* apartment. In one of *my friend’s* apartments, there are Syrians. ‘We are *afraid* to be alone with them. We are *afraid* of them when we meet them in the elevator’. They say, ‘What a *pity* that the apartment has Syrians’. (emphasis added)

Through reporting on *her friend’s* negative experience of living close to them, and almost pleased for not hosting *them* in *her* apartment, the ‘gün’ member confirmed for all of her group that those who contact *them* regret such interaction. In her narrative, to overcome its feelings of fear and anxiety, the in-group seems to be justified in engaging in othering processes, which are already widespread in the local context.

Conclusion

In situations of protracted displacement due to humanitarian crisis, local receiving communities are usually expected to feel compassion towards the

forcibly displaced people and to be motivated to alleviate the suffering of those in need of protection. However, the present study shows that such expectations from the local community underestimate the complexity and depth of othering processes that (re)emerge with social traumas such as the arrival of foreigners *en masse*. Based on the analysis of the conversations in 'gün' groups in Mersin, there is an evident decoupling between the official discourse of the displaced Syrians as 'guests' in need of 'mercy' and 'protection' and the local community's discourse of 'invaders' and 'dissidents' causing 'disorder' and evoking feelings of 'fear' and 'hatred'. Only one member from the *kinswomen* group expressed ambivalence about how displaced Syrians could be viewed and related to, arguing for better integration: 'We don't allow them to be part of society. Shopkeepers are all learning Arabic now. You have to push these people into learning Turkish'. Her group, however, did not support her line of reasoning. All 'gün' group members across all groups, consciously or unconsciously, express negative views about displaced Syrians and reinforce those views in their intimate in-group contexts.

The 'gün' group members' struggle with their fear of why, how, and for how long they will have to live with displaced Syrians is noticeable in their conversations as well as their nonverbal communication. Displaced Syrians are portrayed negatively for their attempts to preserve 'their' culture through socialising with their compatriots, speaking Arabic, and wearing thobes. Syrians are presented as 'causing unemployment', 'increasing crime rates', 'overcrowding housing and disturbing neighbourhood peace', 'corrupting morals by luring Turkish husbands' and 'having too many children'. In 'gün' groups, members reinforce their biases and negative perceptions instead of questioning their approaches to displaced Syrians. Consequently, those 'gün' group members who are afraid in the local community engage in dialogically (re)creating the fear of the out-group.

The analysis of the 'gün' group discourses also reveals that such groups (re)produce cultural and social norms, (re)form perceptions about the out-group members and (re)generate conflicts and social exclusion in society. 'Gün' groups become convenient settings for (re)telling narratives about the (imagined) sources of fear *together* and *regularly*, for (re)affirming how 'real' the threats posed by the out-group members are, and for engaging in co-construction of hostility towards the displaced Syrians. Moreover, the continuing lack of, or at best limited, social interaction between the local community and the displaced Syrians magnifies prejudice, intensifies stereotyping, (re)draws social boundaries of 'us' vs. 'them', and thus justifies intensive othering among 'gün' group members. In the process, intimate social settings among familiar members remain far from operating as venues for deliberation to familiarise oneself with the out-group's customs and habits and/or to cultivate mutual respect among receiving communities and displaced Syrians.

With so many diverse communities receiving asylum seekers and refugees around the world and rising hostility towards them almost everywhere, the

prospects for seeking, constructing, and implementing interventions for alleviating social tensions in receiving societies and promoting social cohesion depend on analysing the complex discursive context within which othering emerges and persists. This research highlights how examining conversations in, and the context of, intimate social settings among local women and men will improve researchers' capacity to explain the complicated psychosocial processes which bring about othering in local communities receiving mass influx. Through such studies, it will be possible to advance our understanding of how receiving communities become entangled in the disruptive effects of othering processes towards forcibly displaced people. This will facilitate the design of knowledge sharing processes about the intensified vulnerabilities of the displaced people and the complexities of 'return' to lands of conflict, as well as paths for meaningful engagements for social interaction among local community members and forcibly displaced people.

Notes

1. The term 'hemşehri' refers to countrymen/townpeople born in the same city, region or village.
2. On public transportation in Turkey, offering seats to the elderly, pregnant women, and people with disabilities is considered a sign of respect while not doing is thought rude and disrespectful.
3. For more information, see "Mersin'de Suriyeli'lerin 'Gürültü Yapmayın' Cinayeti" [Syrians' 'Keep the Noise Down' Murder in Mersin] (*Hürriyet*, 15 May 2017).
4. The Turkish Civil Code criminalised polygamy in 1926. In December 2017, an amendment gave muftis authority to conduct civil marriages. Despite sparking a major debate, the spirit and the letter of the amendment aim to bring more control over attempts at polygamous or early marriage, as the muftis are required to follow all the relevant official procedures (including verifying whether the man is married or not and the age of each partner) before performing the ceremony.
5. Gaziantep is a city close to the Turkish-Syrian border, supporting high numbers of displaced Syrians, who constitute 21.79 percent of the civic population (GIGM 2019).
6. A thobe or thawb is an angle-length traditional garment with long sleeves, designed as Islamic menswear.
7. Temporary Education Centres were set up to help integrate Syrian children into the Turkish educational system (see Aras and Yasun 2016).

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