

Intergroup Contact, Empathy Education, and Refugee-Native Integration: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Lebanon – Alexandra Scacco (WZB), Salma Mousa (UCLA) and Lennard Naumann (WZB)

Abstract:

Intergroup contact and empathy education are widely believed to foster trust, tolerance and cooperation across group lines in deeply divided societies. We test these approaches independently and jointly in the context of refugee-host relations in Lebanon, where Syrian refugees comprise a quarter of the population. Our study embeds a popular existing family psychosocial support (FPSS) program targeting vulnerable youth in a field experiment, where Syrian and Lebanese youth were randomly assigned to either heterogeneous (Lebanese-Syrian) or homogeneous (Lebanese or Syrian) FPSS groups and to an empathy education or placebo curriculum focused on physical health and nutrition. We find that contact does not meaningfully change attitudes toward the outgroup, and has little effect on participation in future contact, such as attending events celebrating the outgroup's culture one month after treatment. By contrast, empathy education consistently improves attitudes toward the outgroup among Lebanese and has positive behavioral effects for both groups. We find no evidence of positive interaction effects between the contact and empathy treatments. These findings suggest that empathy education may be more effective than intergroup contact in improving migrant-host relations in conflict settings.