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Opposition to immigration: How people who identify with far-right discourses legitimize the social exclusion of immigrants

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Abstract

This study sought to develop our understanding of how people legitimize opposition to immigration. Thirty-eight interviews were conducted with people who self-identified with far-right anti-immigration discourses, in Italy (N=23) and Portugal (N=15). Using reflexive thematic analysis, we developed four related themes. In the first theme, *"They're guests": Legitimizing exclusion by differentiating (non-) immigrants*, we discuss how despite differentiating between types of immigrants, participants support their social exclusion and always perceive them as guests. In the second theme, *"White people exist": Multiple and intersected identity threats*, we identify how anti-immigration is legitimized by recurring multiple group threats including ownership, economic, security, cultural, and existential threats. In the third theme, *"It's like your home": Justifying exclusionary solidarity based on ownership rights*, we illustrate how collective ownership is used to justify practices of exclusionary solidarity. In the fourth theme *"This is me": Being born and becoming anti-immigration*, we discuss how opposition to immigration was constructed and influenced by contextual conditions as well as international sources of information. The implications of these findings are discussed while considering how participants' experiences and social contexts shape how they perceive immigration and legitimize the social exclusion of immigrants.

Keywords: anti-immigration, ownership, group threats, social exclusion, exclusionary solidarity.

Introduction

Immigration is one of the most divisive issues in several European countries and has frequently been exploited by far-right movements and political parties (Edo et al., 2019). Following an increasing strength and visibility in nearly all countries throughout Europe (Ehmsen & Scharenberg, 2018; Gattinara & Pirro, 2018), studies focusing on anti-immigration positioning and on far-right political parties have also been increasing, but there continues to be little research on some Southern European countries, including in Italy and Portugal (Alonso & Kaltwasser, 2015; Mudde, 2016). In this study, in a group of participants from Italy and Portugal, we sought to better understand how people claim and mark their anti-immigration positions. Previous studies have suggested that people's opposition to immigration is influenced by multiple and interrelated forces, including how opposition to immigration is covered by the media and mobilized by far-right political parties (Eberl et al., 2018; Facchini et al., 2020; Matthes, & Schmuck 2015). Perceived group threats play a key role in this process, as the belief that the "other" (e.g., immigrants) is detrimental to one's in-group can influence intergroup relations (Schmid & Muldoon, 2015). When a threat is perceived, there is a tendency to emphasize group membership as a way in which to reduce uncertainty and increase the sense of safety and control (Fritsche et al., 2011). Importantly, threats can differ according to the group of immigrants (Hellwig & Sinno, 2017) and can be symbolic (e.g., cultural threat) or "realistic" (e.g., economic threat, physical safety threat) (Stephan & Stephan, 2017). Furthermore, group threats can be existential, encompassing the fear of group annihilation, which seems to be particularly strong in generating immigrants' antipathy (Reicher et al., 2008; Portice & Reicher, 2018).

A recent line of research in social psychology has proposed that ownership threats can also play a role in explaining opposition to immigration and that collective ownership can be particularly useful in understanding social attitudes and political behaviors (Nijs et al., 2020; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2017). A sense of ownership involves the feeling of collective

possessiveness and an attachment to both kinds of objects, i.e., material (e.g., house) and immaterial (e.g., culture) (Pierce & Jussila, 2010). The sense of "ours" legitimizes the process of granting rights and privileges as well as the determination of the entitlement of owners in relation to non-owners (Nijs et al., 2020). As the "owner," one perceives having the right to decide whether to keep a target of ownership and exclude others (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2017). Far-right political leaders often elicit ownership threats to legitimize their territorial and national claims of sovereignty (Verkuyten et al., 2015), which seems to be associated with feelings of exclusive determination rights (i.e., native right to possess) (Nijs et al., 2020) and considered to be a legitimate reason as to exclude others such as non-immigrants (Brylka et al., 2017; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2017).

Despite the recognition that different types of perceived threats play a role in explaining opposition to immigration, there has been little research on how supporters of anti-immigration discourses actively legitimize their positions and what are the main arguments used to justify the social exclusion of immigrants. Against this background, our study adopted a qualitative approach to examine the meanings associated with anti-immigration and explore how supporters of far-right anti-immigration discourses, legitimize their anti-immigration positioning.

The research context

Like other European countries, in the last decade, Italy and Portugal have witnessed an increased visibility of far-right political parties and the intensification of anti-immigration rhetoric by these parties, particularly on social media platforms and/or during electoral campaigns (Padovani, 2018; Garcia-Jaramillo, 2021). In Italy, the far-right party Lega Nord, created in 1989, has undergone different phases and levels of consensus. In the last decade, its social basis has progressively expanded, reaching its peak in 2019 (when it gathered 34.3% of votes in European elections). In 2018, for the first time, Lega Nord joined the government and

its leader, Matteo Salvini, was appointed Interior Minister, enacting more restrictive immigration policies and voicing anti-immigrant and anti-European positions (Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018). In Portugal, until very recently, the Portuguese far-right was considered to be a complete failure in gaining electoral support (Quintas da Silva, 2018). Indeed, the National Renovator Party (PNR – Partido Nacional Renovador) has existed since 2000 (recently renamed as "Ergue-te") but has never succeeded in electing deputies. Nonetheless, with the creation of the new far-right political party Chega (Enough), public support for the far-right began to increase. Chega was recognized as a political party in April 2019, elected 12 deputies in January 2022 and is now considered to be the third political party in the country. Both countries are historically considered to be countries of emigration, despite new migration patterns in the last few decades making Italy and Portugal also destination countries (Eurostat, 2020). Italy ranks as the European country with the fourth-largest total number of immigrants (Eurostat, 2020). Although in a lower position than that of Italy, Portugal witnessed an increase in its immigrant population between 2015 and 2019 (Reis et al., 2020). A recent report (Reis et al., 2020) has shown that immigrants from Portuguese-speaking countries (e.g., Brazil and Cape Verde) have continued to be among the most representative immigrant groups in Portugal. In turn, Romanians, Albanians, and Moroccans are the largest and longest-standing immigrant groups in Italy (Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2021). Furthermore, Italy and Portugal differ in how much their population are worried about immigration issues. In 2019, Portugal was among the few countries in which the population were less worried about immigration. Data collected indicated that 14% of the Italian population but only 2% of the Portuguese population identified immigration to be the most important issue faced by their country (Eurobarometer, 2020). Europeans, in general, tend to overestimate the number of immigrants residing in European countries and the proportion of illegal migrants (Eurobarometer, 2018)

In this study, we examine how people make sense of the social context (e.g., visibility of far-right political parties, history of immigration in their countries, number of immigrants) to support and justify their opposition to immigration. Using semi-structured interviews with people who support anti-immigration discourses in Italy and Portugal, we focus on two main research questions: 1) What arguments and experiences are used to justify and legitimize support for anti-immigration discourses? 2) How are these sentiments against immigration shaped by the social context?

Method

Participants

Thirty-eight interviews were conducted between February and May 2019 with people who self-identify with anti-immigration discourses. The Italian sample was composed of 23 participants (mean age = 42.13), namely seven females and 16 males. All interviews were conducted face to face. Participants lived in small and medium-sized towns in the south of Italy and reported levels of education ranging from high school to a doctorate degree. The Portuguese sample was composed of 15 participants (mean age = 41.46), namely four females and 11 males. Most interviews were conducted face to face, with the exception of two that were conducted via Skype. Participants lived in major urban cities. Like in the Italian sample, participants reported educational levels ranging from high school to postgraduate studies (master's degree).

Data collection

A similar recruitment procedure was followed in both countries. As we were interested in strong identifiers with anti-immigration discourses, potential participants would have to agree with anti-immigration statements (see supplementary file). These statements comprised a

6

combination of declarations by far-right political leaders in both countries. In Italy, the statements came from the leader of far-right party Lega Nord, i.e., Matteo Salvini. The "statements" from Portugal came from the National Renovator Party (PNR – Partido Nacional Renovador), as when this study was designed Chega was not yet formed as a political party. Statements were retrieved from far-right leaders' personal Facebook accounts and selected because they were representative of far-right discourses surrounding immigration (Ekman, 2019).

We created an announcement that was disseminated via email and the Facebook accounts of groups associated with far-right, nationalist, and anti-immigration issues. The announcement presented the anti-immigration statements and invited people who agreed with the ideas in the statements to engage in an open conversation for research purposes. We explained that we aimed to understand the motives of people who respond positively to statements like the ones presented. People were invited to share their contacts using a Google Form form so that we could schedule an interview. In Portugal, nine participants were recruited directly through this announcement, and six were identified and recruited via snowballing sampling. In Italy, an initial group of participants were reached through the personal contacts of graduate students who helped to recruit participants and the remainder via a snowballing technique. Interviews were conducted in public parks, office rooms at the university, and participants' private houses. Before starting the interview, we explained that all of the information shared therein would be anonymous and confidential. Ethical guidelines within the study countries were followed. All participants were asked to confirm that they had all of the information needed and that they agreed to participate in the study. The statements used for the recruitment were also used as an elicitation technique, i.e., as a stimulus with which to encourage participants to discuss their positions openly (Barton, 2015). All interviews began with the interviewer asking participants to explain why they identified with the statements (see supplementary material: https://osf.io/6sxvj/?view_only=630a145260df4026b16d6430b34299fa). We used a

semi-structured interview guide, which was first developed in English and then translated by the co-authors into Italian and Portuguese. The guide included questions on views on immigration perceptions of minorities, self-positioning, and change, as well as views on hate speech, experiences of political engagement, and leader identification. Although none of the authors identify with anti-immigration discourses, we were able to build trust and establish a rapport (Pior, 2018) with the participants by demonstrating active listening and a genuine research interest in the participants' views and arguments.

Interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants, tape-recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. The quotes used in this paper were first translated literally, word by word, and then small grammatical and syntactic adaptations were made to improve the readability. All names were replaced to ensure anonymity.

Analytical procedure

The interviews were analyzed through a reflexive thematic analysis, a method with which to generate, analyze and interpret patterns of meanings across a dataset (e.g., Braun & Clarke 2006, 2019, 2021). Our data analysis adopted a relativist approach. We considered participants' views and experiences to be subjective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), but also recognized the role of social context (i.e., social constructivism) in sense-making. Thus, we aimed to identify key themes across all participants while considering how these meanings were placed within the context in which the data were collected (Kellezi et al., 2021). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) guidelines, the first author familiarized herself with the dataset (phase 1) by reading the interviews and taking notes regarding potential codes (e.g., "attribution of violence and crime to immigrants"). The development of initial codes (phase 2) was data-driven and bottom-up (e.g., "a crisis of values") with the support of NVivo software. The coding phase followed an inductive, bottom-up and data-driven approach as we were interested in seeking novel aspects in the data.

The initial coding of the Portuguese dataset was a starting point from which to identify recurring patterns in both samples and ensure some level of consistency across analyses. The second and third authors coded the Italian dataset, contributing to the development of new codes (e.g., perceived numerousness of immigrants). From the codes relevant to our research questions, five initial main themes were generated (phase 3), which were then reviewed and developed (phase 4) into four major themes that represent patterns of shared meaning across our datasets. In this phase, we examined how our data related to existing theory (e.g., intergroup threat theory). Two of the five initial themes shared a focus on perceived intergroup threats (e.g., perceived identity threat, ownership threat) and were redefined (phase 5) as a single theme focusing on the sense of multiple and intersected identity threats. The final generation of themes involved revisiting our interview transcripts, notes and codes to ensure that our themes were representative of the meanings and experiences within the datasets. The final theme names reflect the combination of inductive and deductive elements in our analytical approach. The first part of the name of the four themes is based on data quotations. The names of the second and third themes were inspired by the theoretical concept of perceived group threat and ownership respectively. These theoretical concepts were used because they were able to capture the central concept of these themes.

Results

Like other studies using reflexive thematic analysis (e.g., Kellezi et al., 2019, 2021), we present a partial account of our analysis that focuses on data related to our research questions. Related to our research questions, we developed four main themes. The first theme was entitled "They're guests": Legitimizing exclusion by differentiating (non-)immigrants. This theme shows how, despite the way in which participants describe and differentiate immigrants, there is a tendency to support and legitimize their social exclusion because they should be considered merely and always guests. The second theme, i.e., "White people exist":

Multiple and intersected identity threats, addresses the types of group threats highlighted by the participants, discussing the links between ownership and identity threats, and how the interviewees positioned themselves as white, European and Portuguese/Italian. The third theme, i.e., "It's like your home": Justifying exclusionary solidarity based on ownership rights, reports on the participants' sense of ownership as the basis for legitimizing processes of exclusion and inclusion. The fourth theme, i.e., "This is me": Being born and becoming anti-immigration, discusses the participants' perceived factors and influences in the process of developing their anti-immigration sentiments. Central to this theme is the idea that anti-immigration positioning is a key aspect in describing their own identities.

"They're guests": Legitimizing exclusion by differentiating (non-) immigrants

In both groups, several participants tend to justify their support for anti-immigration by means of arguments and expressions suggesting the need to differentiate between groups of immigrants as well as the need to always consider immigrants to be different from non-immigrants. Portuguese participants, for example, suggested that skilled immigrants should be considered different from less skilled immigrants, using the difference between "scientists" and "other immigrants" to illustrate their point: "There is no one against the scientists working at Champalimaud Foundation [a private biomedical research foundation]. One person is against these [others]. I mean, this [is] madness!" (Augusto, Portuguese). Interestingly, an Italian participant further complained that some European member states, such as Germany, are able to receive highly skilled migrants, whereas only worthless immigrants enter Italy:

What kinds of immigrants are we receiving? Germany receives [skilled] Syrians and we receive the useless chaff, and I am displeased to say that, but that's the way it is. Our brains must move abroad, and we import this (…)[1]. Do we want to receive them all —

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[1] Three dots within parentheses are used when part of the quote was omitted because it was not relevant to the passage.

the good and evil ones? Done, but they should have been distributed among European countries. If I have to fill all my cities with immigrants, then no. (Giovanni, Italian)

Additionally, while asylum seeking was considered to be a legitimate reason to leave a country, Portuguese participants refused to consider people entering Europe to be refugees and described them as "merely" economic migrants. Expressions such as "false refugee" and "illegal migrants" were used to describe people who are seeking to enter Europe via the Mediterranean: "The refugees! They are not refugees — they're illegal immigrants!" (Pedro, Portuguese). The use of the expressions "illegal" and "false" to refer to refugee people has also been found in other contexts, such as in the discourse of members of right-wing political groups in the European Parliament (Güler, 2019) or in the media regarding migrants fleeing for safety across the Mediterranean Sea in several European countries (Berry et al., 2016). Thus, from the perspective of some participants, "economic migrants" should only be allowed to enter European countries if they are of benefit to said countries. In the view of some Portuguese participants, the country does not need immigrants at all, arguing that a country should consider hosting immigrants only when they are explicitly needed for the economic development of the said country: "We do not need immigrants; that is, immigrants are necessary for temporary needs. There are temporary needs. We have flows, [migratory] flows. Over a decade we have times when we need it and others we don't!" (Sara, Portuguese). Italian interviewees generally depicted immigrants as a problematic category per se without differentiating their status or taking into consideration their immigration motives (e.g., economic migrant, asylum seeker). However, they perceived immigrant groups differently based on their nationality. As in previous research, Chinese immigrants were seen to be unfair competitors in the job market (Maddux et al., 2008) and perceived to be privileged by fiscal policies:

Just take a look around. Immigrants have invaded us. Here [small village] there are

seven Chinese shops (…) well, that's fine — at least they work, and the paradox is that

they hire Italian people — what a nonsense! In the area around the station, there are

the colored ones. You see them hanging around with their bikes late at night. They do

it on purpose to be run over. (Manuela, Italian)

Besides expressing disapproval and discontent with the existence of what she considers to be

too many stores owned by Chinese people, Manuela also seems to associate some groups of

immigrants with criminality. The discursive construction of immigrants as criminals has been

found in other contexts (e.g., Figgou et al., 2011) and in this study was recurrent in the

discourse of several participants:

The crime rate is high because of these people [immigrants]. It was high yesterday and

it is high today, yesterday because of the Albanians and today because of the Africans

[…] also, Chinese people, eh? They come here, run shops, and don't pay taxes; we

must pay 60% of what we earn to the government, and they don't. (Alessandra,

Italian)

In this data extract, Alessandra identifies the nationalities of the immigrants whom she

considers to be responsible for crime and insecurity in Italy. Other participants tend to

generalize and associate crime with all immigrants: "All these immigrants come and make

harm; someone among them may be good, for sure, I'm not saying they are all [bad people],

but the majority" (Antonio, Italian). These discourses echo the rhetoric of Italian far-right

parties, who in their 2018 electoral campaigns fueled concerns surrounding immigration and

security issues (Di Carlo, Schulte-Cloos, & Saudelli, 2018). Moreover, there is a shared

sentiment among Italian participants that immigrants have been favored by the government at

the expense of Italian people:

Government helps these people who come to Italy to seek their fortune. They enter a foreign country and demand food, job, Wi-Fi. You go for a ride and see a bunch of Chinese stores, Chinese people making money here and sending it back home. Arabs also have settled in, and people from Africa. (Loretta, Italian).

Portuguese participants used similar descriptions to refer to immigrant groups in Portugal. However, they tended to focus on the distinction between those who want to contribute positively to Portugal, who are good immigrants, and those who are not interested in doing so, which was considered to be one criterion for their selection:

There are people who are not good and who do not want to make a positive contribution (…). That's where you try to draw the line between the immigrants who are here positively and contributing and those who do not have any intention of living in our society and who might be problematic further down the line. It's those that you would repatriate. (Dinis, Portuguese)

Similarly, many Portuguese participants stressed that immigrants who want to live in Portugal must behave according to the established rules and norms: "I'm not against immigrants per se, but we have to have criteria and they have to know that they are coming to a different culture and that they have to adapt — full stop!" (Vasco, Portuguese). This was also true for Italian participants, who asserted that people who have left their countries of origin are required to conform to the rules of a host nation and relinquish any aspiration of being in charge: "As regard to immigrants, I think that when people move to a foreign nation, they have to conform with its rules — they cannot be the persons in charge" (Alberto, Italian). This and other similar comments suggest that, according to our participants, immigrants should have fewer rights and always be treated differently from non-immigrants.

Overall, this theme shows that while some categories were more stressed by the Portuguese participants, there was a tendency to differentiate between different categories of immigrants, such as the good and the bad, the skilled and the non-skilled, Chinese people and African people, and refugees and economic migrants. However, even those immigrants who are seen to be hardworking and integrated into society are considered to be merely guests who need to respect, conform to and follow the rules, cultural norms, and social patterns. Thus, while not all immigrants are perceived similarly (Savaş et al., 2021; Brader et al., 2008), several Portuguese and Italian participants argued that immigrants should always be treated as guests with fewer rights than non-immigrants, even when contributing positively to the country.

"White people exist": Multiple and intersected identity threats

Both groups of participants describe immigration as a serious problem in their countries, arguing that it is part of a long-lasting political and financial crisis in which economic inequality is growing and welfare resources are being constantly reduced. In both countries, participants focused on the "negative" impacts of immigration by blaming immigrants for the degradation of people's lives, social rights, and working conditions. In Italy, "the unemployment rate is very high. Immigrants' competition is unfair, as they look for illegal jobs. They earn less than us, who must be honest Italians, and we are screwed" (Raimondo, Italian).

Associating immigrants with different types of threats appeared in multiple forms in our analysis. It was used to describe immigrants and also as a motive for protecting identity and self-positioning. Antonio clearly stated: "We need someone who gives to our country its identity back. We were a beautiful nation, but now we are falling low — we are the laughingstock of Europe" (Antonio, Italian). The Italian identity is perceived to be lost and in need to be rescued. Likewise, a common argument for what defines Portuguese people was that of cultural, racial and historical heritage: "Everything that is typical of us, everything that

14

is considered typical of us, is what makes us Portuguese. Our cultural heritage, our racial heritage, our historical heritage — all of it makes us Portuguese" (Ricardo, Portuguese). Indeed, the most common type of argument used to justify beliefs against immigration in both samples was related to a sense of a lack of proximity in terms of culture, religion, and ideology. In this matter, some Portuguese participants stressed their negative views on Roma people, essentially for not fitting in with Portuguese culture and rejecting integration: "These people [Roma people] do not integrate because they do not want [to do so]." (Filipa, Portuguese). This and other discourses regarding Roma people in the Portuguese dataset reproduced several prejudices against Roma people, which continue to be quite common in Europe (Kende et al., 2021). Regarding refugees, most Portuguese interviewees were very explicit that their major concern surrounding the entrance of refugees relates to the entrance of Muslims into Europe. Muslims were perceived to be a higher threat than other groups, even though there is a lack of Muslim presence in Portugal:

> The problem actually arises with uncontrolled immigration from Muslim countries. I can understand it, a simple reason why they try to carry with them all its political, religious nature. It's not a religion. It's a way of being, so they try to apply the state to everything. It doesn't work — there's a clash (Paulo, Portuguese).

It is worth mentioning here that the Muslim community in Portugal represent only 0.04% of the population (World Population Review, 2022). Our analysis supports previous research suggesting that sentiments surrounding immigration are independent of the number of immigrants in a country or locality (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). This can also be found in public opposition to Muslim immigrants, which tends to be high in several European countries, despite the size of resident Muslim populations (Goodwin et al., 2017). Unlike Portuguese participants, Italian interviewees did not express concern regarding Muslim people. However, both argued theirs to be a country that respects human rights, contrarily to

other cultures. For example, several Portuguese participants used the terms "national identity" and "our culture" and associated their language, culture and religion with the need to ensure the existence of white people:

> So what happens [is] we have our cultures, our way of being and acting. What happens when people who have nothing to do with us come? [There is] populational replacement, the loss of identity, [and] cultural ethnicity as well. White people exist. We are not an abstract concept, and we exist, don't we? We are a part of this world (Filipa, Portuguese).

Filipa's extract demonstrates a desire for "white" identities to be recognized as well as a fear of being replaced. This fear is mentioned by several other participants, with some using examples of segregation in European cities and neighborhoods to justify their views: "In London [it] is quite common — there are "no-go!" zones. (…) The country is creating a no-go zone because [London] is a city that is colonized by Islam communities" (Dinis, Portuguese). Likewise, Italian participants related immigrants to a serious threat to Italian cultural and identity roots. Immigrants are perceived as competitors regarding not only the material but also the symbolic resources. According to Italian participants, intercultural integration cannot take place, because Italians and immigrants differ from each other: "No one can achieve integration; we are from opposing countries and we must be against each other's. Differently, if we were part of a unique world, namely Italy, [we] would be happy" (Raimondo, Italian). A lack of diversity is associated with happiness, according to Raimondo, who stresses several times that integration would never be possible. Other participants discussed the potential negative consequences of accepting cultural diversity. According to them, accepting diversity would reveal Italians' weaknesses, contaminate their national culture, eliminate in-group–out-group differentiation, and reduce power differentials. Simultaneously, because immigrants are intrinsically diverse, integration would never be possible. The emerging paradox cannot be

solved: immigrants could be integrated only if they were like Italians, but in such a case the Italian population would lose their distinctive identity: "You can be similar to another in your own country, not at my house. We are incompatible as regards to culture, ideas. This is natural. It's useless pretending to integrate them." (Vincenzo, Italian). Similarly, all Portuguese participants rejected "multiculturalism" and argued that each country should maintain its own "diversity." They all agreed that multiculturalism does not work, tending to use their experiences of intercultural contact, in both personal and work settings, to justify such beliefs.

In both groups of participants, the desire to maintain their national and cultural identity was clearly one of the arguments used to explain their anti-immigration positioning. As in other studies (e.g., Hirschberger et al., 2016), immigration and diversity are perceived to be threats to European, Portuguese and Italian identities. These perceived group threats (namely existential threats) are supported by a strong sense of pride in being white and Italian/Portuguese, as well as all of the associated cultures. Overall, supporting anti-immigration is seen to be what should be done in order to preserve Portuguese/Italian culture and ensure that Portuguese/Italians feel part of their "own country."

"It's like your home": Justifying exclusionary solidarity based on ownership rights
Considered to be the "owners" of their countries and cultures, the Italian and Portuguese populations were perceived to have the right to determine how their resources, goods and rights are used and who can access them. Expressions such as "our people," "our rights," "our land" and "our culture" were often used to legitimate why Portuguese/Italians should have privileges over immigrants.

One common argument used by both groups was that there were not enough resources in Italy/Portugal and that immigrants have been highly privileged until now. Mentioned examples of "privilege" included access to social housing, access to social benefits, and low

business taxes. Immigrants in general, but specifically Roma people and refugees in Portugal, were considered to be the referent others, with participants believing that they have more rights and access to resources than have Portuguese/Italian people:

> We should neither sell ourselves out nor think that reception would mean giving up our rights, as we are Italians in Italy. We cannot give up our rights to others. There is no job for us. We cannot give it to others. (Manuela, Italian).

Participants considered unemployment, homelessness and poverty among Portuguese/Italian people to be a reason to exclude migrants and refugees from social welfare: "I think that, first of all, we have to look at the Portuguese, since there are so many people living on the streets without a home." (Dinis, Portuguese). Moreover, participants explained this positioning by arguing that privileging Portuguese/Italians first is merely a question of valuing hereditary and heritage rights:

> It is a matter of inheritance. It's like your home. You have more rights in your home than any visitor you invite in [...]. Your guests are well treated and they all have the right to it, as long as they behave accordingly. (Rodrigo, Portuguese)

Such a belief also surfaced in the words of Italian interviewees, who shared the conviction that being born in Italy legitimizes any advantage of Italian owners over immigrants. Furthermore, both Italian and Portuguese interviewees expressed ownership over their nation by describing it as their "private home," a "family" in which persons are connected by blood relations and in which citizens are compared with children (whose needs come first): "I wish Italy would first take care of their children and then [all of] the others, [like] a mother who always takes care of her own children" (Raimondo, Italian). Using the argument that it is necessary to preserve long-term and well-established frontiers and power relations,

participants argued that governments should provide social care only to those who were born in Italy/Portugal:

> Well, all human beings should be treated equally, but within the boundaries of their own countries. There must be a reason why boundaries have been established. All the people should be treated equally but it's not Italy's duty to guarantee this. Italy should guarantee this just to Italian citizens, not to the rest of the world. (Loretta, Italian)

Additionally, the idea of exclusionary solidarity was found in the Portuguese dataset. Several participants mentioned that their engagement with identarian and nationalist groups derives from their will to do something for Portuguese people:

> I think priority must be given to them, and that is the view of the organization with which I identify [most]. For example, previous movements that I had been with, instead of supporting the Portuguese, attacked others. They start the problem by attacking others, whereas [our group] starts by helping the Portuguese. (Dinis, Portuguese)

The comment above exemplifies the case of a participant who decided to join an identarian group because he wanted to help non-immigrants, driven by the feeling that only immigrants and ethnic minority groups received social benefits and support. This idea was shared by many other Portuguese participants. All bar four participants mentioned being associated with far-right, nationalist and anti-immigration organizations or political parties. They described volunteering activities such as distributing food and other goods to homeless Portuguese people, the elderly, and institutionalized children. All shared the idea that Portuguese people are being forgotten: "We are forgetting ours" (Helena, Portuguese) — and wanted to support and show solidarity with Portuguese people, as they believe that "native Portuguese" are more entitled to the right to receive support than are immigrants. Thus, participants' discourses

19

suggest an engagement in symbolical struggles over solidarity (Krzyzowski, & Nowicka, 2020), justified by their sense of ownership rights (Brylka et al., 2017; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2017).

Instead of reporting their personal engagement in activities for the benefit of the Italian population, Italian interviewees called for the intervention of a leader (e.g., Matteo Salvini) who resonates with their ideas and would help Italian people to convert back into being the "masters of their own house." According to such a view, denying access to welfare services to immigrants is not discriminatory, but rather a property action with which to confirm the collective ownership of Italians:

> I must say that I agree with the ideas of Salvini and his party colleagues (…) it's fair that Italians come first — we are in Italy, not in Africa. Then we come first and after we may care for others if there's something left. Otherwise, they have to go back (…) all of them should go away. (Angelo, Italian)

Overall, ownership arguments were used to justify out-group exclusion in both samples. Such a claim of ownership included the construction of a narrative according to which Italians and Portuguese are the original owners of their country, and immigrants are intruders who interfere with their legitimate ownership. These accounts suggest a strong sense of ownership threat (e.g., Brylka et al., 2017; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2017), which is used by participants to legitimize the social exclusion of immigrant groups. For the participants in this study, these are "unquestionable" facts, and anti-immigration sentiment is the "right" and the obvious position to take to ensure the preservation and survival of European and Portuguese/Italian identities.

"This is me": Being born and becoming anti-immigration

Some participants focused on how they had formed their views, describing major influences and events involved in their anti-immigration positioning. Participants' accounts of opposition to immigration can be clustered into two perspectives: as stable and crystalized (e.g., I have always been like this) or as a continuous and cumulative process. While we found both perspectives in the Portuguese group, Italian participants seem to identify mostly with the latter.

In fact, many Italian interviewees affirmed that their opinions regarding immigration have not changed over time, although they acknowledged some exacerbation and polarization due to the major influence of external circumstances. This position is evident in the Italian dataset, as attested by Alessia (Italian), who clarified that she had always been uncomfortable with foreign people in her "world." Similarly, Raimondo's response indicated that it was his sense of attachment toward his community that had motivated him to be a right-wing activist for many years — a 'family tradition' that he had passed down to his children:

> I have always been an activist to pursue the interests of my co-fellow community members. Then I've become old, and I passed the baton to my children (…) always right-wing — let me be clear! The principle behind this political trend, without any consideration for political parties, is the attachment towards [one's] own place. It induces people to love who is close to them and not those who live in Africa" (Raimondo, Italian).

Several other participants stressed a similar sense of attachment and a need for belonging to their country and places as the driver of their opposition to immigration. Besides, some Portuguese participants argued having been influenced by their family education and religious background and even described their views on immigration as a matter of heredity. Other participants rejected any influence from others, even their parents: "I've always been like this

since I was a little girl […]. I can say that my father is 1000% communist […]. But I think this is me — there was nothing" (Helena, Portuguese).

By contrast, other participants focused on contextual aspects in explaining their views against immigration. Ricardo, for example, explicitly mentioned having changed and that beliefs can always change according to the situation and what happens in his social world, especially in response to events that may influence his country:

> My stance, as I said right at the start, [on] this issue is like this: it adapts according to what is happening, according to what is happening, according to what I think may change the society where I am inserted, my culture, my country right? (Ricardo, Portuguese)

As in the case of Ricardo, several other Portuguese participants used contextual factors, such as the increase in the number of refugee people or cases of violence and criminality perceived to be committed by immigrants, to justify why their positions against immigration are currently stronger and more polarized. Similarly, all of the Italian interviewees expressed their resentment toward immigrants in the context of the contemporary national situation, which is described as facing financial, political and social troubles. Simultaneously, the increasing presence of immigrants in the country and their competing demands over scarce economic and social resources engendered negative attitudes:

> The historical circumstances, my dear, make people change their minds. When you realize that with what you earn you can't make ends meet, then you get mad seeing that reception centers are full of irregular immigrants who do nothing from day to night. Then you change your mind. (Fernando, Italian).

Focusing on past events, several Portuguese participants mentioned that they had started to take a stand against immigration as a result of the increased entrance of immigrants into

Europe in 2015. Some had started their anti-immigration activism after a counterdemonstration under the umbrella of "refugees welcome". Interestingly, one participant explained that she attended the demonstration to support welcoming refugees, but was then confronted with some "facts" that made her change sides:

> I thought they were refugees from Syria, which they aren't, and that they would be much fewer. But then I also feel that I was somewhat manipulated through the media and they lied to us! And what will be seen is that the refugees [who] are not refugees now, they are migrants. […] I started to become more right-wing, but I was never actually much for politics. (Filipa, Portuguese)

This comment offers several factors that influenced her decision to change sides, including the lack of trust in the media, the number of refugees, and the association of refugees with violent and rape crimes. Furthermore, this case expresses how representations of specific situations can construct fear among people who are not informed of or interested in politics. In turn, Italian interviewees did not mention any specific event as the particular point at which they formed their views against immigration. Rather, adversary junctures have accumulated over a period of time and led to an increase in positions against immigration. At the same time, several participants declared that the moment at which the presence of immigrants became sizeable in the country was the turning point that brought about a decisive change in their views:

> This idea came to my mind due to the [enormous] number of immigrants who enter Italy. My mind was different before that — the thing is not precise. Since when I realized this excessive number, I started to think that the number is the problem, not the immigrants themselves. (Raffaele, Italian)

Despite the smaller number of immigrants in the country, Portuguese participants shared similar concerns. However, recognizing that other European countries have many more immigrants than have Portugal, participants justified their opposition to immigration as a result of their own experience when traveling or living in other countries, making them realize that many European countries are in the imminence of losing "their own national identities" and have become "unsafe and divided," "all due to immigrants."

Portuguese participants in particular described the process of becoming anti-immigration as being cumulative, involving reading and research. Some mentioned independent blogs, identified as being nationalist or identarian, as main sources of information: "But I believe I had some pillars and, I mean, I am participating in this new wave of information, accessing far-right blogs, internationals, North Americans, Portuguese, English" (Xavier, Portuguese) Other participants mentioned books and documents associated with far-right movements as sources of influence (e.g., *Mein Kampf*, the great replacement manifesto). Additionally, far-right identarian groups and movements in other countries were mentioned as being inspirational. Joana stated that "now I relate to the movement [...] it isn't far-right! It's [...] patriotic, an identarian [movement], to be more precise" (Joana, Portuguese). This participant was particularly inspired by what she described as being social work (e.g., providing shelter to national homelessness) conducted by organizations such as the CasaPound and the Lealtà-Azion in Italy, the Hogar Social in Spain, and the Bastion Social in France: "And, therefore, that social work of the identarian movement is excellent" (Joana, Portuguese). International political actors in Europe, such as Viktor Mihály Orbán in Hungary, were also mentioned as strong influences: "(…) the president of Hungary has an attitude which I think is correct. He is radical but goes against what Brussels [the EU] wants to impose. He is against and he doesn't accept everything just because." (Ricardo, Portuguese). Donald Trump was also mentioned as an example of an international influence and as a politician who possesses the right leadership skills:

In Portugal, no, no [referring to the lack of identification with a Portuguese political party]. Outside I identify with the Republican Party. I believe [it] is the political party, at an international level, the one [with] which I feel more identified (…). I look to the other side of the Atlantic and see myself in those values (…). Focusing on Trump, I think the values [on] which he was elected and, contrasting with President Obama, Trump gives an idea of a strong leader. (Xavier, Portuguese)

Interestingly, most Portuguese participants recognized that their influences were international, arguing that there was not yet in Portugal a party corresponding to their demands. A few participants, however, were quite optimistic regarding the recently created far-right political party. In fact, while the Portuguese far-right has been considered a failure in gaining electoral support (Quintas da Silva, 2018), since the creation in 2019 of the new far-right political party Chega (Enough), public support for the far-right has been increasing, with polls showing Chega as the third political party in the country (Sol, 2021).

Overall, in both countries, almost all of the participants agreed that everyday life in their communities and that knowledge of what is happening in other communities and countries have shaped their opinion the most. Moreover, international events, books, and political actors were also considered to be key sources of influence for several Portuguese participants.

Discussion and conclusion

This study was based on interviews with people who identify with anti-immigration discourses in Italy and Portugal. While several studies have examined the discourses of far-right political leaders, a strength of our study is the focus on how people legitimize and mark their opposition to immigration, as well as how such positioning is shaped by the social context. Our analysis supports the relevance of considering intersectionality when examining how people describe immigrants (Savaş et al., 2021). In fact, participants use multiple

categories of immigrants (e.g., Chinese vs. African, good vs. bad) to justify their opposition to immigration. However, even those immigrants who were seen to be hardworking and integrated into society were considered to be mere guests who need to respect and follow the established rules. Thus, while not all immigrants were perceived to be alike (Özge et al., 2021; Brader et al., 2008), they were all perceived to be guests by our participants, even when contributing positively to the country. Additionally, despite some differences when describing immigrants, motives for positioning against immigration were quite similar in both groups of participants, and accounts of multiple and intersected group threats were recurrent. In particular, the collective ownership threat (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2017; Nijs et al., 2021) appeared in both samples as an important mark of anti-immigration positioning. Participants expressed the fear of losing collective ownership of their country, which was used to legitimize the social exclusion of immigrants and the privilege of "nationals" over immigrants. Besides, as in the study conducted by Pellegrini and colleagues (2021), perceived experiences of in-group social exclusion were used as an argument with which to justify the exclusion of immigrants from access to aid and support.

A further important finding is that the collective ownership threat seemed to be related to behavior in the case of Portuguese participants, who justify their far-right activism and exclusionary practices of "solidarity" by stressing aspects related to the right to possess the country and its resources. The negative impacts of collective ownership are starting to be discussed in the literature (Cocieru et al., 2019; Nijs et al., 2021), but we continue to know little as to how it may be linked to expressions of solidarity. Existing literature has pointed towards different forms of solidarity, with various degrees and scope of inclusiveness (Hofmann et al., 2019). The recent support for opening borders to Ukrainian refugees in some European countries, despite the persistent "silence" in relation to non-Western refugees (Jakes, 2022), suggests the complexities and challenges of "solidarity" as well as the need to expand the literature within this field.

Importantly, collective ownership appeared in combination with other different types of intergroup threats (Nijs et al., 2021) as the basis for legitimate anti-immigration positioning. Participants argued that immigrants are competitors regarding material resources and pose a serious threat to the health and security of the host societies that, willingly or unwillingly, accept them. Both Italians and Portuguese described migrants as posing a threat to the economic and social development of their countries, and there was also a tendency to blame immigrants for injustice and inequality. These results show that a psychological motive behind immigrant blaming may be that of restoring self-esteem and positive distinctiveness at both individual and group levels (Martiny & Rubin, 2016). These findings align with existing literature attesting to the so-called economization and securitization of immigration (Rochira et al., 2019). Several studies have reported that immigration has been extensively framed with reference to both economic and safety concerns, especially by far-right political leaders (Verbena et al., 2021; Engler & Weisstanner, 2021; Pellegrini et al., 2021). Our study suggests that these aspects are also used to legitimize opposition to immigration. A limitation of our study, however, is that we did not examine how different groups of immigrants were associated with different threats, as has been previously suggested (Hellwig & Sinno, 2017). This would have been important in order to better understand the contextual aspects within and differences between countries. What is more, our results captured the individual and social demand for reasserting the group existence. Although immigrants were pictured as eroding the economic and cultural assets of the recipient countries, it is the collective-level concern surrounding the in-group present and future existence (Wohl et al., 2010) that seemed to mostly drive anti-immigrant attitudes, i.e., the existential threat (Hirschberger et al., 2016). Participants argued that accepting immigrants and diversity would pose threats to their culture, symbols and beliefs, to such a point that their in-group might transform into another unrecognizable entity (Hirschberger et al., 2016). Several participants were indeed very concerned about the idea of group replacement, which completely aligned with the

psychological definition of a group threat (e.g., Frische et al., 2011). This fear was in some cases associated with national identity (especially for the Italians), but also with broader categories such as "European," "white," and even "catholic." As such, multiple perceived threats, including collective ownership, economic, security, cultural, and existential threats, are used to legitimize anti-immigration positioning in both samples. Future research should examine how they interact with one another according to the differences between immigrant groups. In this regard, our analysis suggests not only the importance of focusing on ownership or existential threats (and the possible link between them and other perceived threats) but also the relevance of examining how these perceptions may hinder practices of solidarity and the inclusion of immigrants.

While high national unemployment rates, poverty levels, and extensive social insecurity seem to be related to the anti-immigration rhetoric in our study, it is vital to recognize the importance of international events and sources of influence. This is evident in the data from the Portuguese participants, who seemed to identify with international far-right and anti-immigration voices. It would be interesting to further analyze how particular international events are framed and constructed by supporters of anti-immigration discourses. In this regard, we recognize that a discursive approach to our data would contribute to deconstructing participants' meanings, thereby offering a more critical analysis of their discourses. Furthermore, we recognize the potential of adopting more than one approach to the data, i.e., a pluralistic approach (e.g., combining discourse and thematic analyses), which would have led to more comprehensive answers to our research questions (Clarke et al., 2015). There are also some methodological limitations in this study that are worth discussing. In particular, our study demonstrates the challenges of conducting reflexive thematic analysis using two datasets in two different languages. We suspect that the development of themes could have been more reflexive had a single author coded both the Portuguese and the Italian interviews. Still, we believe that our thematic analysis presents a useful account of the

participants'participants' experiences and sense making (Braun & Clarke, 2021), while still considering how elements of the social context shape the participants' views and understandings.

In conclusion, our study showed that opposition to immigration needs to be considered a multifaceted phenomenon, which is better understood if we examine multiple and intersected perceived threats, including ownership and existential threats. These shared perceived threats are used to legitimize opposition to immigration and are constructed by several prejudices against immigrants, as illustrated by how immigrants were described in our data (e.g., as criminals, "false refugees," etc.). Despite the multiple negative categories used to describe immigrants, both groups of participants often consider immigrants to be guests who need to comply with national rules and norms. The sense of entitlement to a country and culture (like their own houses) appears to facilitate the legitimization of exclusionary practices of solidarity. Opposition to immigration is then constructed as a necessary path, the right path with which to avoid the replacement of European, white, Italian/Portuguese identities by non-Western identities.

While there are national contextual elements that seem to be associated with the process of how people become anti-immigration, it is vital to recognize the multiple international events and sources of influence that mobilize opposition to immigration. This suggests the relevance of focusing on anti-immigration and far-right issues, even in countries in which far-right political parties are not widespread. In fact, we argue that it is important to examine these issues when public opposition is still low and dispersed, so that it is possible to prevent and avoid mobilization against the social exclusion of immigrants.

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