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Anti-Immigrant Attitudes: The Role of Casual Intergroup Contact in Perceived Group Threat

Şule Yaylacı^a  and Onur Bakiner^b 

^aPenn Conflict and Identity Lab, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA; ^bSeattle University, Seattle, Washington, USA

ABSTRACT

Contextual diversity is considered a prime source of perceived threat from immigrants. Contact theory by contrast suggests that diverse contexts decrease threat by offering opportunities for intergroup contact. Empirical evidence largely shows the effect of positive or negative contact while in reality casual contact, i.e., superficial involuntary contact that does not feature close relationships, is the predominant form of contact. Using data from Turkey on attitudes toward Syrian immigrants, we show that when casual contact is frequent, threat perceptions rise. Our findings invite revisions to the scope conditions of contact theory and the mechanisms behind conflict theory.

KEYWORDS

Contact theory; casual contact; threat perceptions; Turkey; refugees; conflict theory; South-South migration

Introduction

Prejudice against outgroups such as ethnic minorities, immigrants, and refugees has been integral to pivotal events in global politics in the last decade, such as the election of Donald Trump in the United States, Brexit in the United Kingdom, and the rise of far-right parties in Europe. Not only do negative feelings toward the outgroup spur these developments, but such feelings are also reinforced by them (Couzin-Frankel, 2017). Outgroups are perceived to be posing a threat to ingroup resources and culture; these perceptions in turn foster prejudice (de Rooij et al., 2018; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Since 2013, the outflow of Syrian immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees¹—considered the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time—has been associated with nativist threat perceptions in numerous countries (e.g. Gessler et al., 2022; Hameleers, 2019; Hangartner et al., 2019); consequently, anti-refugee sentiment has become a pressing issue.

This paper seeks to understand and explain the determinants of threat perception toward outgroup members. Our theoretical framework adjudicates between conflict theory and contact theory, and the findings refine contact theory with respect to the intensity of the interaction. Conflict theory predicts that contextual diversity (i.e., higher proportions of outgroup populations) will bring about intergroup conflict, and consequently higher threat perception. Contact theory challenges conflict theory by suggesting that in diverse areas that offer more ground for intergroup relations, contact between two groups improves perceptions toward the outgroup. As Pettigrew et al. (2010) state, contextual diversity and contact may have competing effects on attitudes.

Most of the contact literature focuses on contact with positive valence and high intensity, such as intimate forms of contact as observed in the case of friendship. However, the most

ubiquitous form of intergroup contact is actually casual, i.e., not involving close relationships, particularly in immigrant-receiving countries. We define casual contact as involuntary and undirected contact that does not involve close relationships, such as encounters while shopping at a store, walking on a crowded street, or riding a bus (Condra & Linardi, 2019). Especially in the wake of the Syrian humanitarian crisis, contact between the Syrian immigrants and the locals can hardly go beyond casual due to linguistic differences, unless the languages popular in Syria are widely spoken in the receiving country. Thus, our motivating question is: how does the nature of the contact shape threat perceptions? Specifically, we ask: how does casual contact between an ethnically different host society and immigrant/refugee groups affect threat perceptions?

Studying the attitudes toward Syrian immigrants in Turkey, we find that everyday casual contact is associated with higher threat perceptions. While not dismissing possible positive effects of contact on attitudes toward outgroups, we argue that a high level of casual contact is harmful for intergroup relationships, as it is likely to reinforce stereotypical beliefs and increase threat perceptions. This supports Paluck et al. (2019)'s observation in their meta-analysis that the effects of contact are not homogenous; contact interventions concerning ethnic or racial prejudice produce considerably weaker effects. Our findings are also in line with Enos (2014)'s and Hangartner et al. (2019)'s observation that the mere presence of outgroups suffices to spur negative outgroup attitudes. Our analysis also opens the possibility that what is conventionally understood as the negative effect of contextual diversity, i.e., the mere presence of an outgroup, may indeed come from the negative effect of casual contact on intergroup perceptions.

The native population's attitudes toward Syrian immigrants in Turkey represent a valuable case study. Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian immigrants/refugees in the world. Because of the sudden and unregulated nature of the migration flows after 2011, and the cultural and linguistic differences between the native and immigrant populations (Güney, 2022), most intergroup interactions have remained casual in character. In addition, this is a case of South-South migration, which has remained largely understudied in the literature (see Alrababa'h et al., 2021). Considering Turkey's status as a middle-income country where a significant portion of the population remains comparatively poor in comparison to the global North, it is likely that perceptions of threat will be more pronounced. Finally, the recent wave of migration is the first in most citizens' living memory; therefore, perceptions about immigration are likely to have emerged in the recent past, rather than as a result of preexisting political and ideological commitments. For all these reasons, we use a survey conducted in 2016 to assess the underlying conditions for threat perception.²

Intergroup threat

Immigration is often described and perceived as a threat to the receiving country (Green et al., 2015; Sniderman et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2010) by the media, some politicians, and a section of the citizenry. Threat perceptions explain prejudice toward immigrants that in turn underlie discriminatory attitudes and violence against them (Allport, 1954; Fiske, 2002; Riek et al., 2006). Thus, it is important to understand the determinants of threat.

Dating back to Blalock (1967)'s seminal piece on group relations, group threat theory has pioneered the research on perceptions of threat from outgroups. The core idea in the theory is that intergroup competition for scarce resources fuels the perception that outgroups pose a threat to the ingroup. Two conceptualizations of threat guide this line of research (Stephan et al., 2009): Realistic Threat Theory contends that material threats to power and resources, such as employment, security (health or personal), housing or social benefits, are the principal resources at stake, whereas Symbolic Threat Theory focuses on intangible goods such as group's culture, such as values, identity, morality, etc. (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Studies show that appraisals of realistic threat increase prejudice (Bizman & Yinon, 2001; Butz & Yogeewaran, 2011); likewise, perceived symbolic threats also induce negative attitudes toward an outgroup (Chandler & Tsai, 2001; Fetzer, 2000; McLaren, 2003). Importantly, realistic threats are the strongest predictors of prejudice, particularly among the majority group members who rank lower in terms of skill, education, or employment (e.g. Gay, 2006; Mayda, 2006; Sides & Citrin, 2007). Studies further show that realistic threats are stronger mediators explaining the relationship between prejudice and discrimination (Pereira et al., 2010) and between prejudice and punitive attitudes (King & Wheelock, 2007). Even though individuals may not feel a threat to their personal resources, perceiving collective threat to the resources of one's ingroup may suffice to develop prejudice (Quillian, 1995).

Determinants of threat: conflict vs. contact theory

What causes threat perceptions toward an outgroup? While a threat to one's personal self-interests might motivate perceptions of threat (Pettigrew et al., 2007; Rosenstein, 2008), it has long been established that individual-level reasons do not suffice to explain the threat perceptions. Among other sources of threat perceptions, the relative size of the minority group is proposed as a major cause of perceived threat (Blalock, 1967; Quillian, 1995), an idea that gave rise to the *conflict theory* (or *threat theory* in social psychology). This theory considers contextual diversity as harmful to intergroup relations (Stephan et al., 2009), and predicts that as the relative size of the minority group expands, competition for resources intensifies, which leads to higher threat perceived by the majority group members (Dixon, 2006; Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010). Significant amount of empirical evidence supports the hypothesis that anti-minority attitudes are more intense in areas where a minority population has a higher percentage (Fossett & Kiecolt, 1989; Giles & Evans, 1986; Taylor, 1998; Cernat, 2010; see Hogg, 2016 for a review of how diversity relates to threat). Beyond the single-country studies, McLaren's (2003) cross-national analysis shows that on average, living in a country with a higher immigration rate is associated with higher perceived threat regardless of one's personal contact or experience (also see Semyonov et al., 2008). All these works claim that diversity is in and of itself a causal factor in explaining negative outgroup attitudes (see Enos & Gidron, 2016 for details).

Contact theory, which suggests that diversity may help prejudice reduction via allowing for more contact opportunities, stands in contrast to *conflict theory* (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).³ Contact with outgroups can help reduce threat perceptions (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), overcome negative attitudes, and consequently improve interpersonal relations. Much empirical support is also available for the positive effect of outgroup size on lower threat perceptions via contact effects (Wagner et al., 2006) and for the positive effects of diversity (and by implication contact) on prejudice (e.g. Cernat, 2010; Hewstone et al., 2005; Kaufmann & Harris, 2015; Wagner et al., 2006).

If outgroup size indeed reduces perceived outgroup threat via contact, how do we explain the findings in support of conflict theory? How exactly does contact engender positive outgroup attitudes? Do all forms of contact work to reverse the hypothesized negative effects of diversity on group attitudes? The contact event itself is a bit of a black box: "The specifics of communication in contact have been underexamined and undertheorized" (Harwood, 2010, p. 165). Scholars have theorized that contact can help reduce threat perceptions by increasing knowledge and empathy and reducing anxiety toward others, and diminishing perceived differences between groups (Gaertner et al., 1996; Harwood, 2010). Allport's seminal *Nature of Prejudice* (1954) hypothesizes that for contact to be successful at reducing intergroup conflict, it needs to have four prerequisite features or so-called 'optimal conditions': equal status between contacting members of ingroup and outgroup within the contact situation; common goals; cooperative interdependence; and institutional support. Empirical studies do not all support the view that Allport's conditions are *necessary* to observe the positive effects of contact (Forbes, 2004). Some

argue that these conditions rather work as a catalyst and perhaps increase the strength of the effect contact can have on improving intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005, 2006). For others these optimal contact conditions are the bread and butter of positive contact experience, which tends to decrease negative stereotypical beliefs (Di Bernardo et al., 2021). Harwood (2010, 170) echoes these insights and extends them by adding that “uncontrolled and unstructured intergroup contact may be substantially less predictable in terms of outcomes.”

Pettigrew et al. (2010) discuss how opportunities for contact are relevant for contact’s positive effect to emerge between majority and minority groups. For instance, should there be no opportunities for positive contact as observed in segregated communities, outgroup size may continue to fuel threat perceptions. Hood and Morris (1997) add that the effect of outgroup size may indeed be group-contingent. They find that non-Hispanic White Americans who live in areas with more Asian and Latino immigrants have more favorable attitudes toward these groups and immigration (Hood & Morris, 1997), a positive effect attributable to intergroup contact but this finding does not extend to undocumented immigrants (Hood & Morris, 1998). Along these lines, Paluck et al. (2019) observe in their meta-analysis that contact interventions targeting ethnic or racial prejudice yield considerably weaker effects.

These works point to the limitations and scope conditions of the positive effects of intergroup contact. Positive contact experiences with an outgroup member are powerful and can improve attitudes toward the whole outgroup. Yet not all contact carries these positive characteristics. When contact experience is negative, the damage it causes to the intergroup relationship is much higher than the benefits of a positive contact experience. For example, Barlow et al. (2012) find that negative contact is more strongly correlated with increased prejudice than positive contact is with the reduction of prejudice. In a similar vein, Paolini, Harwood, and Rubin (2010) contend that negative contact is more likely to generalize to attitudes about groups than positive contact, as negative contact is more likely to highlight the salience of group identities.

The sites of opportunities for contact, the conditions under which contact happens, and the identity of the outgroup are some factors that can affect the nature of contact (Dixon, 2006; Harwood, 2010; Pettigrew et al., 2010). We start with the premise that in countries receiving a large influx of immigrants from a different ethnic and cultural background, ensuring high-quality positive contact can be challenging. Linguistic differences may impede communication, an essential element for positive contact (Harwood, 2010). To the extent that outgroups are identifiable due to cultural markers (e.g., attire preferences), cultural differences may bolster threat perceptions in the absence of possibilities for communication. All this would render most modes of contact to be involuntary face-to-face contact with an outgroup member—casual and simply superficial. In this study, our focus is precisely on this form of contact. Below we offer our theory about when and how casual contact may aggravate perceived threat.

Casual contact and threat perceptions

Casual contact refers to brief interpersonal contact across groups, “the type that may happen by chance when groups occupy the same place, such as passing another person on the street or seeing her on the train” (Enos, 2017, p. 15). Allport (1954) cautions that this type of superficial intergroup contact could reinforce stereotypes and feed negative outgroup attitudes, as it does not generate new information about each group. Furthermore, the absence of more meaningful contact may be mutually interpreted as a sign of mistrust by both group members. Thus, Allport (1954, 264) posits that “the casual contact has left matters worse than before.” We build on this intuition and offer a more comprehensive account of how casual contact shapes threat perceptions.

Casual contact, which often only includes minimum communication between the parties, should by definition be free of strongly positive or negative emotions. Enos (2014), however, shows that the mere presence of outgroups is sufficient to fuel exclusionary attitudes, presumably

because casual contact with outgroups activates the negative stereotypes (cf. Green et al., 2020). Recently, Hangartner et al. (2019) find that even exposure to the chaos of refugee arrivals in the location refugees are just passing through, i.e., not their final destination, induces a sizable and lasting increase in natives' hostility toward refugees, which they explain with reference to social threat.

We argue that casual contact may induce cognitive effects similar to negative contact particularly when it is highly frequent. Contact that is characterized as cold, distanced, and discomforting, which often defines negative contact, can reaffirm the stereotypical beliefs, increasing prejudicial attitudes (Barlow et al., 2012) and making ingroup membership more salient (Paolini et al., 2010). Frequent casual contact could similarly activate the preconceived sociotropic (i.e., collective-level) threat, particularly if the two groups are ethnically different (Condra & Linardi, 2019). Seeing ethnic outgroups around without getting to know them may trigger perceptions of immigrants as *others*, activate stereotypes and intergroup anxiety (Paolini et al., 2016), and engender or fortify beliefs that immigrants are *en masse* tapping the limited resources that should be exclusive for the natives. The rising visibility of outgroups may provoke thoughts about losing ingroup resources and privileges and evoke a feeling that "others/non-coethnics" have been invading one's own space. Along similar lines, frequent casual contact increases the salience of sharing social space with refugees/immigrants and generates a "perceptual effect" which shapes people's cognition vis-à-vis perceived distance between the groups (see Enos, 2017).

Our main hypothesis is then:

High-frequency casual contact is associated with higher realistic threat perceptions.

Importantly, we distinguish between the frequency of contact and contextual diversity. In contexts with a relatively large immigrant population, the frequency of casual contact will likely be high, and it is difficult to disentangle the diversity effect from casual contact effect. Yet, many geographical areas do not have exceptionally high ratios of outgroups to native populations, and in such contexts the casual contact rate of individuals, rather than aggregated ratios of immigrants to natives, should be considered as the main driver of attitudes toward outgroups.

Our study is similar to Pettigrew et al. (2010), who develop a path analysis where the relationship between the percentage of foreigners and prejudice is mediated by contact and threat. Our analysis focuses on the first half of their path analysis, as we focus on threat as the dependent variable, but unlike them we model contact and diversity together as explanations for threat and extend their findings by focusing on casual contact in a case of South-to-South migration, which may produce distinctive dynamics of resource availability and competition in comparison to migration from the South to the North (see Alrababa'h et al., 2021).

The Turkish context

Turkey hosts the highest number of Syrian immigrants/refugees in absolute numbers—the 3.7 million registered and about 400,000 estimated unregistered Syrians in Turkey make up 51% of the total number of Syrians who left their country after April 2011—and second highest per capita after Lebanon (UN Refugee Agency, 2020). In addition, only 10% of the immigrants have been living in the 21 designated refugee camps; therefore, most Syrians' likelihood of interaction with the local population is high.

The local population in Turkey has become increasingly hostile to the refugees as migration soared. From 2011 to 2012, the number of refugees went up by 18-fold from 14,457 to 267,063 and then rose by almost six-fold to 1,587,365 in 2016 and to more than 3 million in 2017.⁴ As a result of the mass influx particularly in 2014-2015, complaints about so-called "intruders" have replaced the characterization of Syrians as "guests" in the early years of the civil war (Akar & Erdoğan, 2019). The percentage of people agreeing with the statement "Refugees are not a concern of Turkey and should be sent back to their country" climbed from 38.9% to 86.2%

from 2014 to 2018 (Erdoğan, 2018). Along with these sentiments emerged anti-refugee protests, discriminatory rhetoric, and violent attacks (e.g. Saraçoğlu & Bélanger, 2021).

International Crisis Group's (ICG) 2018 report states that intercommunal violence between the host community and Syrian refugees increased threefold in the second half of 2017 compared to the same period in 2016. They recorded 181 refugee-related social tensions and criminal incidents in 2017 (as of 30 November) in Turkey, which resulted in 35 deaths (24 of them Syrian), and added that there are many more unreported incidents of such intercommunal violence (ICG, 2018). Furthermore, projections of peaceful coexistence do not seem likely according to a recent study: 75% of the Turkish respondents disagree that they can live in peace with Syrians (Erdoğan, 2018).

We anticipate most forms of contact to be casual between the native population of Turkey and Syrian refugees due to linguistic and cultural differences. Our anticipation is theoretically grounded on the reasoning laid out in the previous section. In addition, empirical evidence abounds for similarly distanced intergroup relations around the world. For example, although desegregation in South Africa gave birth to new opportunities for intergroup contact, according to one study, there was almost no intimate contact between different racial groups in the few years following the end of apartheid (Durrheim & Dixon, 2014). Similarly, in the US, there was not much evidence of meaningful interaction between the Black and White families in mixed neighborhoods (Hamilton & Bishop, 1976) even after the end of segregation; a similar dynamic is reported in Israel between Arab and Jewish Israelis (Enos, 2017, Ch.7).

Data and methods

Data comes from a survey study conducted in Turkey by Konda Barometer Study (2016). The survey is part of the company's monthly barometer study to gauge basic political attitudes; each month the company integrates novel questions about timely topics. In the February survey in 2016, their topic of choice was attitudes toward Syrian refugees. The survey sample is nationally representative and randomly selected from 27 of Turkey's 81 provinces.⁵ Within the scope of the February survey, 2,649 respondents were interviewed face-to-face in 136 neighborhoods and villages of 98 districts—including central districts—of 40 provinces on February 6 and 7, 2016.

Variables

Realistic threat perceptions is the dependent variable in our study, and we use four items from the survey instruments to measure it. The list of the questions is as follows:

1. Syrian refugees are hurting Turkey's economy.
2. Job opportunities declined because of the Syrian refugees.
3. Refugees should no longer be admitted into the country.
4. Because of the Syrian refugees, cities are no longer safe.

We conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) along with principal component analysis to find out the number of latent variables (factors) that can explain the relations among this set of indicators. The analysis showed one underlying factor with the eigenvalue of 2.21, and all the items had uniqueness scores of less than 0.55 (See Appendix). Thus, we conclude that these items can serve as correlates of the latent construct 'perceived threat'.

Our main independent variables are the *frequency of contact* and *relative size of immigrants*. We measure frequency of contact with the question 'How often do you encounter Syrian refugees?' The response options are: 1) Never, 2) Once every few months, 3) Once a month, 4) Few times a month, 5) Once a week, 6) Few times a week, and 7) Every day. To code the relative size of immigrants, we use the data from the Directorate General of Immigration Management in Turkey.⁶ They publish the number of Syrian refugees by province regularly,

and we use their data as of January 29, 2016, a few days before the survey was conducted. The province-level population figures from the Turkish Statistical Institute are obtained to generate a measure that shows the ratio of Syrian refugees in each province relative to its population.

We also control for *economic circumstances, education, ideology, age, gender, and ethnicity* (see [Appendix](#) for details). Summary statistics of all the variables are available in [Table 1](#). We treat the data as multi-level, as individuals are nested in provinces. We develop random intercept models in which the estimation of the constant term varies at the province-level as errors tend to be correlated at the province level. For estimation, we use ordinary least squares given the continuous nature of our dependent variable.

Analysis and findings

We estimate eight models to test our hypotheses and check for alternative specifications (see [Table 2](#)). To see the independent effects of the two main independent variables, contact and contextual diversity, we exclude the contact variable in the first model, and the rate of immigrant variable in the second model.⁷ Not surprisingly, the relative size of immigrants is positively related to perceived threat (Model 1 and 3). Regarding the effect of contact, Model 2 shows that the higher the frequency of contact, the higher the perceived threat. Because the categories

Table 1. Summary statistics.

Variables	Mean/Frequency
Perceived threat [0,1]	0.71 (0.268)
Relative size of immigrants [.004,24.1]	3.56 (6.106)
Frequency of contact	
Never	12.28%
Once every few months	5.69%
Once a month	6.02%
Few times a month	7.89%
Once a week	8.46%
Few times a week	15.13%
Every day	44.53%
Economic circumstances	
Yes, I was able to make ends meet and even able to save some	16.59%
I barely made it	54.58%
Not really, I was not able to make it.	10.65%
No, I could not pay my bills and have debt.	18.18%
Party Affiliation	
AKP	45.75%
CHP	19.64%
MHP	7.08%
HDP	6.87%
Other	1.55%
Undecided	12.61%
Does not vote	6.51%
Education	
Less than high school	51.16%
High school degree	32.98%
University degree	15.86%
Ethnicity	
Turkish	80.97%
Kurdish	12.44%
Zaza	1.59%
Arab	1.75%
Other	2.52%
No response	0.73%
Female	46.32%
Age [17,88]	40.9(14.7)

Note: For continuous variables, standard deviations are in parentheses next to mean scores.

Table 2. Effect of contact on threat_OLS results.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
		Full Sample (All provinces)			Restricted Sample (Excludes provinces where the ratio of immigrant to the local population is higher than 15%)			
Relative size of immigrants	0.007*** (0.002)		0.007** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)	0.005 (0.008)		0.003 (0.009)	0.001 (0.009)
Frequency of contact (Continuous)		0.008** (0.003)	0.006* (0.003)			0.007* (0.003)	0.007* (0.003)	0.007* (0.003)
Frequency of contact (Ref.cat.:Everyday)				-0.035* (0.017)				
Never/once every few months				-0.071*** (0.017)				
Occasionally (once or a few times a month)				-0.052*** (0.013)				
Quite often (once or few times a week)				0.535*** (0.029)				
Constant	0.501*** (0.028)	0.488*** (0.032)	0.471*** (0.031)		0.506*** (0.030)	0.478*** (0.032)	0.474*** (0.034)	0.476*** (0.034)
Random Effect Parameters								
Province-level variance								
Constant	-2.807*** (0.168)	-2.568*** (0.156)	-2.744*** (0.167)	-2.749*** (0.166)	-2.825*** (0.180)	-2.747*** (0.177)	-2.751*** (0.178)	-2.744*** (0.178)
Individual-level variance								
Constant	-1.405*** (0.014)	-1.408*** (0.014)	-1.408*** (0.014)	-1.412*** (0.014)	-1.399*** (0.015)	-1.403*** (0.015)	-1.403*** (0.015)	-1.403*** (0.015)
Observations	2469	2459	2459	2459	2214	2204	2204	2170

* p < 0.05 ** p < 0.010 *** p < 0.001 Standard errors are in parentheses. Ref.cat. refers to reference category. Models with full list of variables are available in Table A 2 in Appendix.

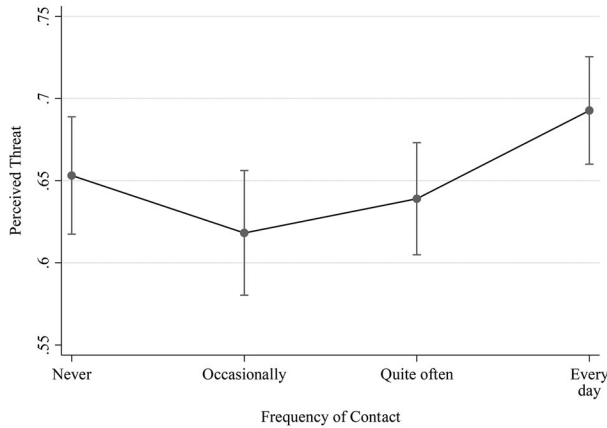


Figure 2. Effect of casual contact on perceived threat.

Note: The full names of the categories of frequency of contact on x-axis are as follows: Never/Once every few months, Occasionally (Once every few weeks), Quite often (Once or few times a week), and Every day. The figure is produced for the sample restricted to provinces where the rate of immigrants is less than 15%.

contact. As Hangartner et al. (2019) find in Greece, exposure to the refugee crisis itself rather than refugees themselves can suffice to foster negative attitudes toward refugees. The authors suggest that “disruption of everyday life was not a mere nuisance for the local population but was perceived as an upset of the social order and generated a feeling of threat” (p.446) even though refugees were only in transit. In Turkey, the rapid increase in the influx of Syrian refugees in the course of a few years¹⁰ was a crisis in and of itself, which may have contributed to the attitudes toward Syrian refugees in Turkey turning sour. Unlike Greece, Turkey was the destination, not just a transit stop for millions of refugees. The negative coverage of the refugee arrivals in the media may have also contributed to the perception of sociotropic threat even in the absence of contact (Bilge, 2019; also see Esses et al., 2013), as threat is a function of many sociostructural forces such as political discourses and sociotropic concerns as well as individual factors (Pettigrew et al., 2010).

Threat perceptions do shift with contact. What is clear from our results is that high-frequency casual contact brings about higher threat perceptions. However, when the frequency of casual contact is not high, i.e., when casual interaction between the groups is limited, outgroups may be perceived to be lower in numbers. Decreased visibility brings about decreased salience of outgroups (Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010; Taylor, 1998), and thus outgroups may not be perceived as posing a major threat to resources (Green et al., 2020).

We check whether the frequency of contact involves types of contact other than casual, such as close contact in the form of friendship. Hypothetically, one may think of situations where language barriers may be lower, such as among colleagues. In such cases contact at workplace could theoretically approximate to a more positive contact experience, via extended interpersonal contact, as friendship is within the realm of possibility. Because our focus is on casual contact, we decide to exclude these possibly positive contact experiences to ensure that they do not bias the results. Model 8 excludes these forms of contact from the sample, and the findings remain the same (See Appendix).

The results also show that supporters of opposition parties have higher threat perceptions than the supporters of the incumbent party (AKP). Women have on average higher threat perceptions than men. Economic circumstances are a strong predictor of threat perceptions. As compared to the group that does not report facing difficulty making ends meet the month before the survey (‘Yes, I was able to even save some’ category), all other groups have higher threat perceptions (See Table A 2 and robustness checks in Appendix).

Discussion and conclusion

Conflict theory and contact theory make different predictions for the role of diversity in intergroup relations: the former expects a negative effect for the large size of outgroups on outgroup attitudes, while the latter expects a positive effect. We explain that besides consistently positive contact experiences, it is difficult to presume these effects will proceed from the contact. We focus particularly on casual contact, which is ubiquitous in contexts with a relatively high number of outgroups in a context, assuming outgroups do not live in a closed-off community or a refugee camp. The frequency of casual contact is critical because it affects the salience of the outgroup. Our premise is that unless there is a way for the contact to generate positive feelings, the high frequency of casual contact can generate similar effects as negative contact.

Our study shows that if contact stays at a superficial level, the high frequency of contact can be detrimental for intergroup relations, as it heightens threat perceptions. As such, our analysis narrows the scope of Pettigrew and Tropp (2006)'s assessment about the generally positive effect of *any form of* contact. Casual contact may promote higher perceived threat when the intergroup encounters take place frequently without meaningful interactions.

Our findings also show that the reported rate of individual-level casual contact with Syrian refugees and contextual diversity as measured by the rate of immigrants in a province are not interchangeable variables to measure intergroup contact. One may assume that high-frequency casual contact signifies high contextual diversity or vice versa yet that is not necessarily the case when groups are not integrated. Particularly in contexts without a centrally executed urban planning intervention for the integration of refugees as part of immigrant settlement policies (see Edin et al., 2003 for an example of intervention), ethnic residential segregation can occur organically (see Brâmă, 2008; Grimes, 1993). In highly segregated cities, chances of contact would be low even when there is diversity at the macro-level. Refugees tend to locate in ethnic 'enclaves' within metropolitan areas, and this breeds residential segregation as shown by empirical data from Turkey, particularly in provinces with a lower concentration of refugees (Bertoli et al., 2021; Şimşek, 2020). Thus, unless the rate of refugees to local population is high, it is likely that group members will not have opportunities for contact. As such, we cannot assume that contextual diversity as a variable captures the effect of contact, and our findings support that.

Only in the three outlier provinces located along the Syrian border in our survey sample (Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Hatay), is high contextual diversity tantamount to high-level casual contact. For every five to six locals there is one Syrian immigrant/refugee, four out of five locals report seeing Syrians every day, likely in groups. Most other provinces included in the sample however have less than 4% of immigrants, and there is no relationship between diversity and threat in these provinces. We conclude that the main driver of threat perceptions is more likely to be contact.

Our findings also cast doubt on the role of contextual diversity (also see Hjerm, 2007), as we do not find the relative size of the minority group to be associated with threat perceptions. Yet, our measures of contextual diversity are limited to the aggregate level (province). We believe that contextual diversity is a key factor so long as it can account for contact frequency; as Enos (2017) says context is the container that hosts intergroup interactions. The negative effect of diversity proposed by conflict theory is thus likely a product of casual contact. Higher-level aggregation of minority ratios does not successfully capture the contact frequency. Future research should explore the effect of immediate context (e.g., neighborhood composition) in a South-South migration case.

Our study has some limitations. We show limited effects of contact, but our focus is on casual contact. The success of positively valued contact is yet to be tested in South-South migration. Our findings are also limited to contexts with heightened threat perceptions. The rapid increase in the number of refugees is a major element in security-related threat perception, and compounding this is a prevalent economic threat perception, also a fundamental ingredient of realistic threat. Turkey, the world's leading Syrian refugee-hosting country, was facing an

economic downturn in 2016, when the survey was conducted, and the Syrian crisis was heavily politicized at the moment. So, it presents a complex context for intergroup relations, and the findings here may not be generalizable to contexts that are not as contentious.

Some policy implications follow from our findings. This research shows that intergroup conflict is not an inevitability. The nature of the contact is much more significant than the size or perceived cultural assimilation of the immigrant population. However, a hands-off policy of letting intergroup dynamics play themselves out could lead to prejudice and discrimination, not so much because those dynamics always produce negative interactions, but rather because casual contact is interpreted in a negative light in the first place. It is thus important to promote close, meaningful intercultural contact, especially in the context of immigration (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2021).

Thus, policies that promote intergroup contact should move beyond merely casual contact (Oliver et al., 2020), and be attuned to the nature and context of the interaction, as well as the differential effect of such contact for different groups (Marinucci et al., 2021). Research shows that friendship may foster positive attitudes by blurring the boundary between the self and the other (Page-Gould & Mendoza-Denton, 2011), and friendship lowers threat perceptions toward the outgroup (Green et al., 2020). In fact, even somewhat casual “everyday friendliness”, which includes acts like small talk or greetings, may strengthen social cohesion (Driel & Verkuyten, 2022).

Host countries can encourage structured and meaningful forms of contact between the host population and the immigrants to generate these effects via thoughtful integration policies. Social policies involving housing, employment, and language access of new immigrants are critical for integration prospects, and they should all be targeted toward encouraging social relations between the host communities and newcomers (Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). Residential segregation and local integration are simply at odds (Belloni et al., 2016), and without opportunities for being coworkers or simple communications, it is difficult to foster meaningful relations. Many host countries such as Sweden or Canada have instituted cheap or free programs to invite immigrants to learn the host country’s language(s) (Ferris, 2020). Education and employment policy should take into account the potential for reduced threat perception when ingroup and outgroup members interact on a consistent basis over issues that matter to them. Likewise, cultural communication initiatives may help to foster meaningful contact. Overall, we conclude that intergroup communication mediated through policies and initiatives by civil society and local governments to overcome the negative effect of casual contact is likely to help improve intergroup relations.

Notes

1. We use the term “refugee” interchangeably with “immigrant” to refer to those who have left their homeland to flee violent conflict. Most Syrians have not been granted legal refugee status in Turkey or elsewhere; they remain asylum-seekers, or in the case of Turkey, may have received “temporary protection status”. Therefore, our definitions seek to capture lived experience rather than legal status.
2. The selection of an early-2016 dataset is important to eliminate the confounding effects of the July 2016 coup attempt, the subsequent emergency rule, and Turkey’s increasing military presence in Northern Syria after 2018 on public opinion.
3. Although both conflict and contact theories assume intergroup contact to be a strong predictor of outgroup attitudes, conflict theory alludes to contextual contact effect while contact theory refers to behavioral contact effect (Stein et al., 2000).
4. The numbers are obtained from UNHCR’s Refugee Data Finder at unhcr.org/refugee-statistics.
5. See [Appendix](#) for the full list of included provinces.
6. <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>
7. Using both the rate of immigrants and frequency of contact in the same model is not a concern for multicollinearity. Their correlation coefficient is only .27, and we checked variance inflation and all variables are below 1.5 (critical value is above 10).
8. The results are robust to using religiosity instead of party choice and using income brackets instead of individual evaluations of economic circumstances (see [Appendix Table A 3](#) for robustness checks).

9. We use Stata's *margins* command's contrast function to estimate the difference in probabilities of threat perception.
10. The number of Syrian refugees in the beginning of 2014 was less than 500,000, by the time the survey was conducted in 2016, the number had soared to 2,5 million.

ORCID

Şule Yaylacı  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7701-5962>

Onur Bakiner  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7330-7789>

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