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**INTERGROUP CONTACT AND INTERGROUP
RELATIONS: THE ROLE OF MORALITY IN THE
SECONDARY TRANSFER EFFECT OF
ACCULTURATION PROCESSES**

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General Introduction

Social harmony is a broad construct that refers to the achievement of positive intra and intergroup relations within a society, expressed through individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours (Saguy et al., 2011). Both the acculturation and intergroup contact literatures have sought to address this issue (Lefringhausen et al., 2020; Kunst et al., 2021; Hässler et al., 2020), focusing on processes that can foster harmonious coexistence between cultural groups, i.e. native and migrant populations.

However, contemporary multicultural contexts pose unique challenges, as they require managing relations between natives and multiple migrant communities with diverse cultural backgrounds (Berry, 2023; Sam & Berry, 2006). In this context, establishing positive intergroup relations requires not only considering and managing the cultural differences of various migrant groups, but also their migration motivations and status, all of which can vary greatly across categories of migrants.

These complexities call for a paradigm capable of addressing social harmony in a more generalised way. In this regard, the Secondary Transfer Effect (from now on STE; Pettigrew, 2009), when integrated with acculturation processes¹, represents a valuable framework for advancing our understanding of how social harmony can be fostered in multicultural societies.

This is particularly relevant because, although acculturation theory has long been considered the primary paradigm for studying migration processes (see Sam & Berry, 2006), it does not fully capture the dynamics of today's multicultural contexts. Similarly, Intergroup Contact theory (Allport, 1954), which focuses on prejudice reduction and is strongly related to acculturation (Redfield et al., 1936), does not sufficiently explain how prejudice reduction and

¹ Acculturation processes among natives refer to both attitudinal and behavioural orientations towards how migrants should acculturate, which in turn shape different adaptation outcomes.

positive intercultural relations can be achieved in societies characterised by multiple and heterogeneous cultural groups (see Vezzali et al., 2021; Pettigrew, 2009).

For this reason, integrating the STE paradigm, which originates in intergroup contact theory, into the study of acculturation may provide a promising framework for promoting social harmony in multicultural contexts such as Italy (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025). Specifically, since acculturation processes capture the dynamics that produce diverse outcomes across cultural groups, focusing primarily on those concerning intercultural relations (Sam & Berry, 2006; Berry, 2019), their integration within the STE paradigm can clarify how these processes may be strengthened and generalised across the broader society. This approach is particularly relevant for contexts such as Italy, where migration represents a relatively recent and fragmented phenomenon (Livi Bacci, 2010), and where managing cultural diversity remains a significant challenge (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2023).

Building on these assumptions, the present research project seeks to provide empirical evidence of the potential of adapting the STE paradigm to acculturation processes, especially among natives, given their significant role in shaping intercultural relations (Zagefka et al., 2023; Sam & Berry, 2006). Moreover, the project aims to disentangle how positive intergroup contact can lead to generalised acculturation orientations among natives towards different migrant groups, highlighting the pivotal role of morality perceptions in shaping these processes. To this end, the project employs both experimental and cross-sectional designs across four studies, providing robust support for the applicability of this paradigm and offering a useful framework for addressing cultural diversity and promoting social harmony in Italy.

This dissertation is divided into different chapters, with the following one providing an overview of the migration context in Italy, emphasising the importance of addressing the complexities of cultural diversity to foster social harmony and support migrants' successful

adaptation within society. Chapter 2 focused on the role of acculturation research in understanding migration phenomena, highlighting its limitations in explaining how social harmony can be achieved in today's multicultural contexts. Building on this, Chapter 3 introduced the potential of the STE as a framework for addressing this gap. Chapter 4 then highlighted the pivotal role of moral perceptions, illustrating how positive interactions with one migrant group can foster generalised acculturation orientations among natives, through a reduction in moral distance perceptions (Pacilli et al., 2016). These generalised processes have been considered essential processes for promoting both migrants' adaptation and positive intergroup relations in multicultural societies such as Italy. Following this theoretical work, the research questions and specific background for each study were outlined. Finally, the four empirical² studies and the general discussion were presented.

² All the studies have the ethical approval: UniCa—Prot. n. 0000610 and CERT_18AFAF1E221.

Chapter 1

From Arrival to Integration: Migration and Intercultural Relations in Italy

Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the migration situation in Italy, examining the increasing presence of migratory flows within the national territory and the characteristics that distinguish them, such as cultural diversity, settlement patterns, and migration motivations. The chapter pays particular attention to the shortcomings of Italian policies in promoting effective integration between the native population and migrants, along with an analysis of natives' attitudes towards them. The aim is to provide a solid foundation for understanding the urgency of effective integration strategies that can engage the native community and address social harmony within the contemporary migration landscape.

1.1 Overview of Migration in Italy

The rise of multiculturalism in various Western societies (Berry et al., 2022; Berry & Sam, 2013; Sam & Berry, 2006), including Italy (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025; Eurostat, 2024), has highlighted the need to foster harmonious coexistence and positive acculturation practices between the native population and migrants. Within this complex context, promoting integration has become increasingly challenging as well as relevant, over the years (Sam & Berry, 2006; Berry & Hou, 2016; Berry et al., 2006; Berry, 1997; Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2012; Stogianni et al., 2021).

Italy is the third main destination country for migrants coming from non-EU countries. In 2022, arrivals increased, reaching over 5 million migrants, approximately 70% of whom were non-EU citizens (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025; Eurostat, 2024). In 2023, the migrant population accounted for 6.4% of the national total (Eurostat, 2024) and was characterised by significant heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity and culture, settlement patterns, and migration motivations (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025).

Regarding ethnic and cultural differences, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2025) reports that most migrants arriving in Italy originate from Europe (29%) and Africa (29%), with a predominance of people from Albania, Morocco, and Romania. The different cultural groups present in the territory also highlight the complexity of promoting adequate integration that takes cultural differences into account.

In these dynamics, settlement patterns play a significant role as well. Indeed, there has recently been a growing number of long-term or permanent migrants (residents), along with a relative decrease in irregular migrants (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025). The presence of long-term migrants legally settled in the country contributes to the stability of the migration landscape and has led to a growing number of second-generation migrants, who in turn will give rise to a third generation (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025). This process increases the

likelihood of smoother adaptation across these groups. Most long-term migrant groups originate from Europe, which makes the migratory and cultural dynamics associated with arrivals from Africa less stable than those linked to European migration (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025), highlighting the need to consider these differences in order to understand the specific needs of one's country.

Additionally, the motivations driving people to migrate to Italy represent an additional important element of diversification in the migratory landscape, as well as a key factor both for the development of appropriate integration policies and for understanding migrants' experiences and the natives' response to the phenomenon (Sam & Berry, 2006). Over time, migratory flows to Italy have changed in terms of the structural characteristics of incoming populations and the motivations driving migration. Until 2010, incoming flows were primarily driven by work-related reasons (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025). However, in subsequent years, partially due to Italy's relatively low economic attractiveness, these motivations partially declined, with a 42.2% decrease in 2023 compared to 2022, alongside reductions in arrivals for study purposes (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025). Furthermore, since 2011, many arrivals in Italy have been motivated by family reunification, with migrants already residing in Italy facilitating the arrival of family members who remained in their countries of origin. More recently, there has been an increase in arrivals for asylum and international protection (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025). In this context, Eurostat (2024) highlights a prevalence of migrants of Asian (43%) and African (23%) origin. This growth has also been influenced by the war in Ukraine, which accounted for 33% of international protection applications in 2022 (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025). Ultimately, future projections indicate that population growth in certain regions, such as Africa, together with climate change and economic disparities compared to Europe, will make migratory flows from these countries increasingly intense over the coming years (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, Centro Studi Confronti & Istituto di Studi Politici "S. Pio V.", 2024).

This scenario, characterised by diverse motivations driving people to leave their countries, increasingly necessitates a continuous adaptation of migration policies in countries like Italy, which is also essential for handling the phenomenon of irregular migration.

In Europe, in 2023, 1.3 million irregular migrants from non-EU countries were registered, approximately 15% of whom arrived in Italy. Among irregular migrants in Italy, the majority are asylum seekers, often in transit to other countries (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025). This phenomenon of irregular migration, primarily composed of asylum seekers and refugees, has given rise since 2015 to the so-called “refugee crisis” (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, Centro Studi Confronti & Istituto di Studi Politici “S. Pio V.”, 2024), which both Europe and Italy have been attempting to manage. To address this crisis, Italy has implemented several policies. These measures have primarily focused on externalisation, which has severely compromised the human rights of migrants through detention centres where individuals are subjected to abuse, violence, extortion, and, in some cases, even killings (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, Centro Studi Confronti & Istituto di Studi Politici “S. Pio V.”, 2024). Although such protocols are intended to ensure dignified reception and support EU countries in managing the initial integration processes, in many cases, they have turned into practices of deprivation of liberty, for which Italy remains legally responsible (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, Centro Studi Confronti & Istituto di Studi Politici “S. Pio V.”, 2024). For this reason, the crisis related to irregular migration, along with the promotion of integration in Italy, remains a significant issue. Managing migratory flows and integration is particularly challenging in the Italian context, where the lack of adequate policies (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination report 2023) intersects with the increasing structural diversity of migrants (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025), including cultural differences, settlement patterns, and migration motivations.

1.2 Integration Policies for Migrants

Despite Italy presenting a complex migration landscape (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, Centro Studi Confronti, & Istituto di Studi Politici “S. Pio V,” 2024), it also shows a significant delay in developing an adequate model for migrant integration compared to other European states. This delay is mainly due to the fact that, until the mid-1990s, both immigration and integration were regulated solely through administrative acts of the Ministry of Labour and consolidated public security laws, which focused primarily on the recruitment of foreign labour and the control of entries (Ibrido & Marchese, 2020). However, given the complexity of the migration landscape over the years, including Italy’s accession to the Schengen Agreement and the Dublin Convention (1997), as well as the rise in discriminatory phenomena (Triandafyllidou, 1999), the absence of adequate policies to address these issues has resulted in a complex and challenging management of migratory flows. Italian policies have been fragmented, offering very limited scope for promoting integration between the native population and migrants.

Most policies focused not only on regulating entry for labour market purposes but primarily on controlling migration flows and the expulsion of irregular migrants, including the establishment of detention centres for identified undocumented migrants, with only a few measures aimed at promoting integration (Ibrido & Marchese, 2020). Specifically, the first proper definition of integration was introduced in 1998 through the Consolidated Immigration Act, which gathered important provisions regarding the civil, social, and political rights of migrants. The Act moved beyond viewing migrants solely as a “labour force” and introduced the idea of integration as a bidirectional process, involving both the host society (i.e., natives) and migrants. However, in the following decade, Italian migration policies adopted a more restrictive approach, focusing on controlling migrants and fighting irregular migration. During this period, the first forms of externalisation of migration management to Libya occurred,

initially in 2008 through an agreement, followed by a formal Italy-Libya Memorandum in 2017. In 2012, a further step towards promoting migrant integration was the introduction of an agreement between the Italian State and migrants applying for residence permits, based on mutual commitments. The State guaranteed respect for fundamental rights and provided tools for learning the language, culture, and constitutional principles, while migrants were expected to comply with the rules of civil society. However, this agreement took on a predominantly punitive character, placing the responsibility for inclusion on migrants while largely neglecting the role of the host society.

Progress in integration policies was further advanced with the National Integration Plan (2017) for holders of international protection, which paid particular attention to the initial disadvantages and vulnerabilities of asylum seekers. This plan represented a further step for Italy in promoting integration, and it was based on three fundamental principles: (1) integration is a complex process that begins at the moment of first reception and aims to achieve personal autonomy; (2) integration requires the engagement and awareness of the host population and must be rooted in local communities; (3) special attention is needed for the most vulnerable individuals, including women, victims of trafficking, and unaccompanied minors.

Despite these advances, some limitations persisted. Integration policies emphasised an assimilationist rather than an integration model, and additional laws were enacted that were not fully aligned with the principles of the National Integration Plan (Caneva, 2014). Indeed, subsequent legislation continued to favour a restrictive approach to migration management, creating a climate less conducive to integration. This highlights the ongoing lack of effective internal management of migratory processes and insufficient attention to integration pathways, which are essential for promoting harmonious coexistence between the local population and migrants (Sam & Berry, 2006).

1.3 Attitudes and Intergroup Relations Between Migrant and Native Communities in Italy

In light of the limited effectiveness of Italian policies in promoting integration between the local population and migrants and considering the crucial role of the host community in facilitating these processes (Zagefka et al., 2023), it is essential to analyse the attitudes and relational dynamics between Italians and migrants within the national context.

As observed in other European contexts, Italians tend to exhibit predominantly negative attitudes towards migration (Dixon et al., 2018). According to the data presented in the report *Attitudes towards National Identity, Immigration and Refugees in Italy*, only 18% of Italians perceive the impact of immigration on the country as positive, while 57% view it negatively, and the remaining 23% hold a neutral position. This tendency was further confirmed by more recent data, such as the 2022 European Commission Special Eurobarometer, indicating that only 22% of respondents viewed immigration as an opportunity, whereas 43% reported uncertainty about it.

This negative perception is primarily associated with economic concerns: 52% of the population believes that immigration has a negative impact on the national economy, reinforcing the idea that migrants represent a threat to local employment (Dixon et al., 2018). More recent surveys indicate that economic issues remain the top priority for the Italian population, even surpassing concerns about immigration (European Commission, 2022). However, given the strong connection between these two topics, perceptions of immigration and economic insecurity appear to partially overlap.

These economic concerns are coupled with cultural worries. A significant portion of the population believes that immigration has contributed to fragmenting the social fabric of the country: even among the more open segments of the population, one-third of Italians argue that immigration has exacerbated social divisions. Only 26% consider that it has had a positive

influence on Italian culture, while 46% disagree, and a further 26% hold no definite position (Dixon et al., 2018).

These data also suggest a distorted conception of integration in the country, often understood as unilateral assimilation rather than a process of mutual exchange and adaptation. This reductive approach is confirmed by the fact that only 35% of Italians agree with the right of refugees to maintain their own traditions, while 32% oppose it (Dixon et al., 2018). It is therefore not surprising that a large majority (64%) agrees with the idea that refugees should be accepted only if they respect Italian culture and laws, reflecting a conditional and selective attitude towards inclusion (Dixon et al., 2018). However, some recent findings suggest a slight shift in public perceptions, showing that 62% of respondents viewed integration as a two-way process, conceptualised as a shared responsibility between migrants and the host society (European Commission, 2022). However, these results did not address more practical items, so this notion should be considered mainly conceptual, as it is not supported by broader or more transversal measures. Furthermore, this evidence contrasts with findings concerning the prevalence of racism in Italy. Specifically, 58.5% of respondents believe that racism has increased in the country, showing a clear upward trend from 2015 to 2022 (CENSIS, 2024).

Moreover, distrust in the State's ability to effectively manage migratory flows and integration processes is clearly evident, particularly regarding labour policies and social planning (Dixon et al., 2018). An additional point of concern is the entrenched link, present in Italian public discourse, between immigration and public health. Indeed, 39% of Italians believe that migrants pose a threat to collective health (Dixon et al., 2018), a perception less widespread in other European countries.

Fears related to national identity and security are also reflected in the distinction that the Italian population types of migrants such as between refugees and economic migrants. In general, refugees are perceived somewhat less negatively, yet there remains a strong preference

for “remote” support: 61% of Italians prefer to assist refugees in their countries of origin rather than welcome them in Italy (Dixon et al., 2018).

Another crucial aspect concerns the role attributed to religion and morality in shaping the image of migrants, with particular reference to the Muslim population. In Italy, there is a significant overestimation of the Muslim presence: the average public estimate suggests that Muslims account for 20% of the population, whereas in reality they constitute around 3% (Dixon et al., 2018). Additionally, there is a perceived incompatibility between Islam and Italian values, especially regarding women’s roles and adherence to civic norms and security (Dixon et al., 2018). Such beliefs foster distrustful attitudes and contribute to the construction of a moralising narrative that positions Muslim communities as radically “other” (e.g., Zolberg & Long, 1999).

In light of these dynamics, the Italian context appears particularly challenging for integration processes, with a significant responsibility attributable to the absence of structured and inclusive public policies. This gap was also highlighted by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2023 expressed strong criticism of Italy for not yet implementing effective measures against structural racism. Among the issues identified were the lack of systematic collection of disaggregated data by ethnicity and nationality, the absence of a comprehensive legal definition of racial discrimination, the lack of an independent body for the promotion of equality, the use of racist political rhetoric, and numerous reports of hate speech and hate-motivated acts (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2023). Particular attention has been given to the situation of the Romani, Sinti, and Traveller communities, who continue to face structural discrimination, housing insecurity, and social exclusion. Moreover, acts of violence and stigmatisation against people of African descent have been reported, indicating the persistence of discriminatory practices that require urgent and systemic interventions.

In summary, the analysis of attitudes towards immigration and migrants in Italy reveals a complex and often hostile landscape, in which economic, cultural, and symbolic fears intersect with governance deficits. This scenario underscores the need for a rethinking of public policies to promote a truly inclusive integration, based on mutual respect and the recognition of diversity as a valuable resource.

Conclusion

The increasing migratory flow into Italy, expected to intensify due to economic needs and political and environmental challenges affecting various regions (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, Centro Studi Confronti & Istituto di Studi Politici “S. Pio V.”, 2024), highlights the crucial importance of handling migration in the country.

Current policies, still limited and ineffective, as highlighted by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination report (2023), represent a significant barrier to integration processes. It is essential to work towards developing effective strategies to foster positive intercultural relations between native and migrant communities in order to build an inclusive and harmonious society that values the cultural richness of diversity.

In this context, literature from social psychology and cross-cultural psychology provides valuable insights for understanding how to promote effective harmonious coexistence within the Italian social fabric.

Chapter 2

Understanding Acculturation: Theories and Processes for Enhancing Intergroup Relations

Abstract

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the acculturation literature and its connections with the intergroup contact tradition, with particular emphasis on the limited attention paid to antecedents that shape acculturation processes. Although extensive research has focused on migrants' adaptation outcomes, the processes through which natives contribute to shaping these outcomes still could benefit from further investigations. Moreover, existing studies provide only partial insights into how natives' acculturation processes can contribute to harmonious coexistence between cultural groups and which antecedents drive these processes. In response to these gaps, this chapter argues for the integration of acculturation theories with intergroup contact generalisation paradigms. This could allow for a more comprehensive understanding of what drives natives' acculturation processes and how these processes can enhance social harmony within multicultural contexts.

2.1 Understanding Acculturation: Strategies, Models, and Relational Outcomes

Acculturation theory has long been recognised as the primary paradigm for analysing migration phenomena, offering a comprehensive framework to understand how we can achieve harmonious coexistence between different cultural groups (Lefringhausen et al., 2020; Kunst et al., 2021), investigating the processes and outcomes that emerge when culturally diverse groups come into contact (Sam & Berry, 2006). Redfield et al. (1936) originally defined acculturation as the phenomenon that occurs when groups from different cultural backgrounds interact, leading to changes at both the collective level (e.g., social structures; Berry, 1990) and the individual level (e.g., attitudes; Berry, 1990). Building on this definition and the assumption that acculturation produces change across multiple levels, Sam and Berry (2006) identified three core processes that characterise it: *contact*, *reciprocal influence*, and *change*. *Contact* is considered a prerequisite for acculturation, as it requires the interaction of at least two cultural groups. When migrants encounter the host society, they enter a process of *reciprocal influence*. Although the native population often exerts a stronger impact, intercultural contact produces changes in both groups (Sam & Berry, 2006). To explain how reciprocal influence translates into *changes*, several models have been proposed. Among the most influential is Berry's *stress, coping, and adaptation* framework, introduced in 1997. This model focused on how intercultural contact leads to changes among cultural groups at both the group and individual levels, shaping different forms of adaptation, originally conceptualised for migrants. At first, researchers identified two main forms of adaptation (Ward, 2001): psychological adaptation, referring to emotional well-being and life satisfaction (Searle & Ward, 1990) and sociocultural adaptation, defined as the acquisition of skills and competencies for effective functioning in the new cultural environment (Searle & Ward, 1990). Another form is intercultural adaptation, which was later conceptualised by Berry (2015, 2017) as the dimension concerning the quality of relationships between groups in contact. This includes mutually positive cultural group

attitudes and the absence of prejudice and discrimination, factors considered particularly influential in shaping other positive migrants' adaptive outcomes (Guerra et al., 2025; Te Lindert et al., 2022).

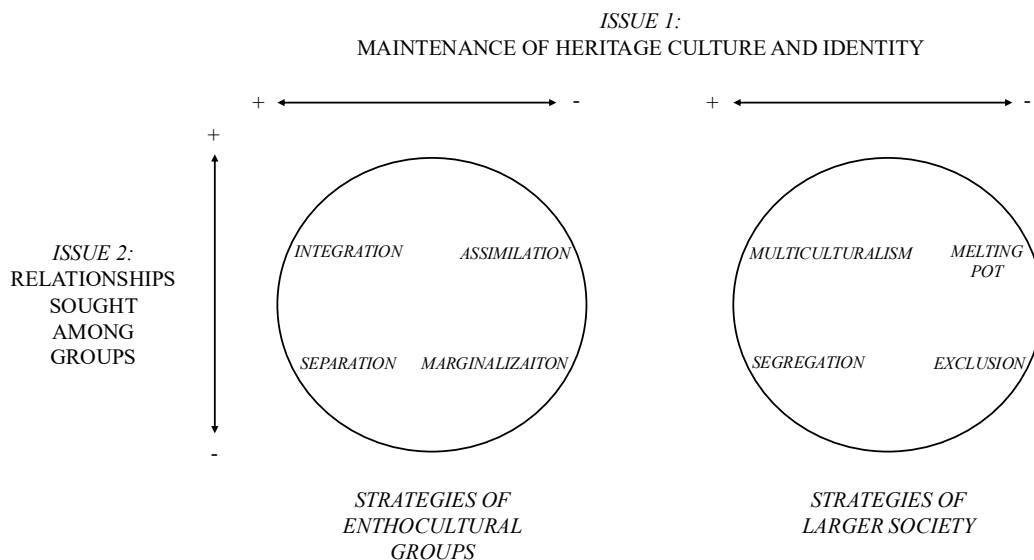
To explain how contact shapes these forms of adaptation, Berry (1980) conceptualised four acculturation strategies, originally formulated only for migrants, based on two dimensions. These two referred to the extent to which migrants participate in the cultural life of the host society and the extent to which they maintain their heritage culture. The four strategies that emerged (see **Figure 1**) are: *assimilation* (participation in the host culture without heritage maintenance), *integration* (participation while maintaining heritage culture), *separation* (heritage maintenance without host culture participation), and *marginalisation* (neither heritage maintenance nor host culture participation). Migrants may shift between strategies over time, producing varied adaptation outcomes, not only positive. Specifically, Berry argued that the integration strategy generally emerged as the most beneficial for migrants' adaptation (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2012; Sam & Berry, 2006)³. A study by Abu-Rayya and Sam (2017) showed that engaging in this strategy enables migrants to receive support from both cultural groups, which improves their well-being, and to develop competence in both cultural practices, which fosters successful psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Although this framework and the acculturation strategies were initially conceptualised with a focus on migrants, later models highlighted the importance of also considering natives' acculturation orientations in shaping migrants' adaptation (van Oudenhoven et al., 2006), given the bidirectionality of broader acculturation processes (Redfield et al., 1936). Indeed, subsequent research has stressed that the role of natives cannot be overlooked. Although integration strategies, when adopted by migrants, generally yield benefits for their adaptation, they cannot be effectively implemented without support from the native group (Berry, 1991). For this reason, more recent models place

³ This assumption has also been challenged, with evidence suggesting that contextual and structural factors (e.g., discrimination, policy regimes) can diminish its benefits (Rudmin, 2003; Kunst et al., 2021).

greater emphasis on the interaction between the acculturation preferences of both groups in shaping migrants' adaptation outcomes.

This recognition, concerning the significant role of natives in shaping migrants' acculturation, led to Berry's *Mutual Acculturation Model* (MAM; 1980; properly conceptualised by Sam & Berry, 2010), which introduced corresponding acculturation strategies for natives. Within MAM, natives' orientations towards migrants are conceptualised along the same two dimensions that Berry proposed for migrants, producing four specular strategies (see **Figure 1**): *segregation* (preferring migrants to maintain their heritage without participating in host society life), *multiculturalism* (supporting both heritage maintenance and participation), the *melting pot* (preferring participation without heritage maintenance), and *exclusion* (rejecting both). Although MAM has rarely been applied empirically, it laid the conceptualisation for later interactionist models that explicitly examined the reciprocal influence of migrants' and natives' acculturation strategies.

Figure 1. *Acculturation Strategies*



Note: the figure was adapted from the Berry Mutual Acculturation Model (1980; Sam & Berry, 2010)

Two models developed in line with the assumptions of the MAM are the *Interactive Acculturation Model* (IAM; Bourhis et al., 1997) and the *Concordance Model of Acculturation* (CMA; Piontkowski et al., 2002). Both focus on how the misalignment between migrants' and natives' acculturation strategies influences the quality of intergroup relations, later conceptualised as a form of intercultural adaptation (Berry, 2015; 2017). The IAM posits that the interplay of both groups' strategies may produce consensual, problematic, or conflictual relations. Additionally, later extensions to this model introduced additional strategies such as *individualism* (Montreuil et al., 2004; e.g., "Whether migrants maintain their heritage culture or adopt the culture of the host society is ultimately unimportant, as each individual is free to choose the cultural practices they prefer") and later *integration with transformation*, where natives actively adjust aspects of their culture to foster migrants integration (Montreuil et al., 2004). The model explained outcomes related to intercultural relations, showing that when either natives or migrants prefer segregation or exclusion, they are more likely to experience conflictual relations, which in turn produce negative adaptation outcomes such as miscommunication, stronger stereotypes, and increased discriminatory behaviour, effects that primarily disadvantage migrant groups (Bourhis et al., 1997). Conversely, when both groups simultaneously prefer integration, assimilation or individualism strategies, consensual relations emerge, leading to better communication between groups and reduced discriminatory behaviours (Bourhis et al., 1997). Finally, discrepancies between acculturation strategies among groups such as integration, assimilation, and individualism result in problematic relations, which generate negative outcomes similar to those of conflictual relations, though less severe (Bourhis et al., 1997).

Similarly, the CMA focuses on discrepancies between migrants' and natives' preferences regarding cultural maintenance and contact. The focus of this model is to highlight problematic or conflictual relations that arise across both dimensions. Specifically,

disagreement between migrants and natives regarding migrants' cultural maintenance is defined as a cultural problematic discordance, while disagreement over migrants' contact with natives is defined as a contact problematic discordance. Concordance on both dimensions results in consensual relations, whereas discordance on both leads to conflictual relations. Problematic and conflictual relations can influence threat perceptions of the groups, which in turn may foster negative intergroup attitudes (Piontkowski et al., 2002). As hypothesised by Piontkowski et al. (2002), discordance in the cultural dimension, which directly concerns cultural identity, emerged as particularly significant in shaping threat perceptions. Specifically, for natives, the greater the extent to which they perceive migrants as wanting to maintain their culture beyond what they deem acceptable, the stronger their sense of threat towards migrants (Rohmann et al., 2006). For migrants, by contrast, high levels of cultural discordance endanger the survival of their cultural identity, thereby enhancing perceptions of both symbolic and realistic threat (Rohmann et al., 2006).

Despite the differences between the models, their overall contribution lies in showing that migrants' adaptation is shaped not only by their own orientations but also by natives' strategies, thereby highlighting the central role of intercultural relations, which prove highly significant in shaping the overall positive adjustment of both groups (Berry, 2019).

More recently, Navas and colleagues (2005, 2007) introduced the *Relative Acculturation Extended Model* (RAEM), which further addressed the complexity and variability of acculturation, distinguishing between ideal and real acculturation among both cultural groups. Ideal acculturation refers to the optimal options that migrants would like to adopt and the options that natives prefer migrants to adopt. Real acculturation refers to the actual practices in which migrants engage and the practices that natives perceive migrants to follow.

The RAEM also emphasises the role of domains in shaping acculturation, suggesting that ideal and real acculturation may differ across life domains, generally categorised into two types: public and private. According to Navas and colleagues (2005, 2006), public domains include (a) work/employment, (b) economic life (consumption habits and family finances), (c) political and governmental systems, and (d) social welfare systems, and private domains include (a) social relationships and friendships, (b) family relationships, (c) religious practices, and (d) ways of thinking and values/principles.

Specifically, a member of the host community may prefer that migrants maintain their heritage values and identities in private domains while simultaneously adopting host culture values and identities in public domains; likewise, migrants may maintain heritage practices in private domains but feel compelled to adopt host community practices in public ones. These practices may or may not align with host community members' perceptions. Specifically, Mancini and Bottura (2014) suggested that perceptions of discrepancies between real and ideal acculturation in private domains between the two cultural groups emerge as those most implicated in conflictual intergroup relations. Thus, the RAEM adds a greater level of complexity to understanding acculturation processes and intercultural adaptation, suggesting different outcomes depending on the strategies adopted in various domains and the distinction between real and ideal acculturation.

Taken together, these models underscore the multifaceted and bidirectional nature of acculturation, highlighting the importance of considering natives in understanding this process. This is particularly important given the significant role that natives play in shaping intercultural relations and influencing migrants' broader adaptation within society, especially as they often represent the numerically larger and more powerful group (Sam & Berry, 2006; González et al., 2010; Piontkowski et al., 2000; Zagefka et al., 2009). Moreover, the literature emphasises intercultural adaptation as a core outcome of acculturation, assigning it a significant role in

shaping the broader positive adjustment of both groups in contact (Berry, 2019). For this reason, it is essential to consider the role of natives when examining acculturation processes, particularly in relation to intercultural adaptation. Nevertheless, despite the valuable contributions of these models in highlighting migrants' adaptation outcomes and intercultural adaptation, as well as drawing attention to natives' acculturation preferences, research has devoted relatively little attention to the antecedents that shape these outcomes by shaping acculturation preferences and practices. This gap limits our understanding of how specific strategies emerge and how they, in turn, relate to different forms of adaptation, particularly intercultural adaptation.

2.2 Gaps in the Acculturation Literature: The Influence of Intergroup Contact and Moral Perceptions on Natives' Acculturation Processes

The literature consistently emphasises that existing models have largely focused on the role of acculturation strategies in explaining migrants' adaptation outcomes. Far less attention, however, has been devoted to the antecedents and underlying processes that shape these strategies and, ultimately, the adaptation outcomes (Schwartz et al., 2010). This imbalance has resulted in a partial understanding of acculturation, as it overlooks the factors that drive individuals and groups towards particular orientations in the first place (Titzmann & Jugert, 2015).

In addressing this issue, González and Brown (2016) emphasise the potential contribution of intergroup contact theory to explaining how different acculturation strategies develop and how diverse adaptation outcomes can be achieved. Despite the clear theoretical links between Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997) and Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Brown & Hewstone, 2005), their integration has only recently begun to receive systematic attention (Brown & Zagefka, 2011; Van Acker & Vanbeselaere, 2011). Specifically, González and Brown (2016) made a particularly notable contribution by demonstrating that

intergroup contact, both direct and indirect, acts as a significant antecedent of acculturation preferences. Additionally, their longitudinal research showed that, for natives, it is the quality rather than the quantity of contact that promotes integration preferences and support for migrants' cultural maintenance. This evidence underscores the significant potential of intergroup contact literature to enhance our understanding of acculturation processes. In particular, it highlights how the quality of interactions can shape natives' acculturation preferences and support for migrants' cultural maintenance (González & Brown, 2016), with natives' acculturation preferences being especially influential in determining adaptation outcomes, including intercultural adaptation (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2012; Sam & Berry, 2006).

Closely linked to intergroup contact as a key outcome of positive intergroup interaction (Brambilla et al., 2013a), migrants' morality has also been investigated as an alternative antecedent in shaping natives' acculturation processes.

Research in this area (López-Rodríguez & Zagefka, 2015; Urbiola et al., 2021; Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020; Kunst et al., 2025) has shown that natives' moral perceptions of migrant outgroups play a critical role in shaping their acculturation processes, as when migrants are perceived as moral, natives are more likely to view their cultural practices as non-threatening and therefore legitimate to preserve. Specifically, López-Rodríguez and Zagefka (2015) provide the first experimental evidence that moral stereotypes attributed to the migrant outgroup influence natives' preference for migrants' cultural maintenance. No comparable evidence was found for stereotypes of competence or sociability. Moreover, the results did not support a similar role of morality in relation to cultural adoption, which appears less sensitive to moral stereotypes and shows less variability. The reason could be that morality is especially relevant to cultural maintenance because the preservation of migrants' traditions and values can be perceived by natives as a potential threat to their own group's cultural identity. In this

context, judging migrants as moral reassures the natives that cultural maintenance does not endanger their group, making them more tolerant. By contrast, cultural adoption refers to migrants embracing the host culture, which is generally viewed positively by natives regardless of moral perceptions. Additionally, other researchers addressed a similar issue to that proposed by López-Rodríguez and Zagefka (2015), examining the role of life domains, as outlined by Navas et al. (2005, 2006), within the RAEM. The results of this study showed that natives' ideal acculturation preferences regarding migrants' cultural maintenance and adaptation within private domains (e.g., social, family, religious, and values) were both related by morality perceptions of migrants. Conversely, these relationships did not emerge when public domains (e.g., political, work, or economic) were taken into account. These findings partially align with López-Rodríguez and Zagefka's (2015) results, while also highlighting the significant role of life domains in explaining these associations. Indeed, Ordóñez-Carrasco et al. (2020) found that moral stereotypes are equally relevant for natives' preferences regarding cultural maintenance and adoption of migrants, but only within private domains. Specifically, the results indicate that when natives supported migrants' cultural maintenance within private domains, they perceived them as more moral, whereas when they endorsed cultural adoption within the same domains, they perceived them as less moral. This suggests that morality also plays an important role in cultural adoption. One possible explanation is that private life domains are perceived as especially central within a cultural context, which makes moral evaluations particularly salient in this sphere, also for cultural adoption. By contrast, when less central domains are considered, the role of morality appears to be less influential.

A relevant advance in this area was provided by Urbiola et al. (2021) and Kunst et al. (2025), who highlighted the role of morality and immorality for both migrants and natives. The researchers showed that moral stereotypes operate differently for the two groups: migrants' perceptions of natives' immorality discouraged them from adopting the mainstream culture

(Urbiola et al., 2021), whereas natives' perceptions of migrants' immorality increased their demand for migrants' cultural adoption (Urbiola et al., 2021) and generally strengthen natives' inclination to avoid integration with them (Kunst et al., 2025). Additionally, perceiving migrants as moral can increase natives' willingness to adopt elements of their culture (Kunst et al., 2025). Morality thus becomes central, as its absence makes the other group appear threatening, leading migrants to distance themselves from natives and natives to push for greater migrants' assimilation without supporting any interactions with them.

Building on these assumptions, the literature suggests considering the role of morality in understanding intergroup relations, highlighting how moral perceptions can shape natives' acculturation preferences.

Since morality perceptions and intergroup contact experiences are themselves strongly interconnected (Brambilla et al., 2013a), this body of research underscores the potential of considering both as key antecedents in natives' acculturation processes.

Although intergroup contact and morality perceptions have been shown to play a potential role as antecedents of acculturation processes, especially among natives, important limitations persist. Research examining natives' acculturation processes, including the role of intergroup contact and moral perceptions as antecedents, remains limited and has often focused on a single migrant group, thereby restricting the generalisability of findings across diverse cultural groups. This narrow focus constrains our understanding of whether observed patterns of natives' acculturation and intercultural adaptation outcomes hold for migrants from diverse backgrounds, with varied migration experiences. Consequently, there is a need for research that simultaneously examines natives' acculturation processes (which are significant for shaping migrants' adaptation and intercultural relations) across multiple migrant groups, in order to handle the broader complexity of multicultural societies (Berry, 2023).

Following these directions, expanding research that examines the antecedents of acculturation within a generalisable paradigm appears particularly promising for understanding how natives' acculturation processes shape intercultural adaptation within the current cultural heterogeneity context. In this respect, the Secondary Transfer Effect paradigm (Pettigrew, 2009) emerges as especially relevant. Developed within the intergroup contact literature, the STE highlights how positive interaction with one outgroup can generalise to attitudes towards other, uninvolved outgroups. Applying this framework to acculturation research allows us to move beyond the study of dyadic relations between natives and a single migrant group, and instead to capture the complexity of multicultural societies (Berry, 2023).

Conclusion

Acculturation theories have long served as the primary frameworks for studying migration phenomena (Sam & Berry, 2006). Traditionally, these models have emphasised the significant role of natives in shaping migrants' adaptation and intercultural adaptation (see Zagefka et al., 2023). However, they have paid relatively little attention to the central role of antecedents in shaping these processes (González & Brown, 2016) and have largely overlooked the potential of broader generalisation paradigms to account for them. In light of the increasing heterogeneity of contemporary migration flows, there is a pressing need for approaches that can account for the simultaneous presence of multiple migrant groups within the same host society. Integrating acculturation models with the STE (Pettigrew, 2009) paradigm, whose theoretical foundations within intergroup contact literature will be examined in the following chapter, represents a particularly promising direction, as it enables scholars to move beyond dyadic interactions and to capture more generalisable processes of intercultural adaptation, taking into account the role of natives in shaping these processes.

Chapter 3

The Secondary Transfer Effect: Bridging Acculturation and Intergroup Contact to Foster Harmony in Multicultural Societies

Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the STE paradigm, emphasising its potential as a framework for promoting positive intergroup relations between natives and migrants (i.e., intercultural adaptation) in multicultural contexts such as Italy. It highlights the value of this paradigm for advancing acculturation research by outlining the key processes through which it can contribute to this field. Finally, we suggest that applying the STE paradigm to acculturation processes may offer valuable insights into the specific mechanisms that foster social harmony between different migrant groups in contact.

3.1 The Secondary Transfer Effect: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Natives' Acculturation Processes within Multicultural Societies

Intergroup contact has long been considered a key strategy for promoting positive attitudes and relations between members of different social groups (Hodson & Hewstone, 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Allport, 1954). For contact to be effective, however, certain conditions must be met (Allport, 1954): it must take place under equal status between the individuals involved, be oriented towards common goals, encourage cooperation, and be supported by authorities.

The assumptions underlying this theory have been widely confirmed in the literature (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) across different outgroups (e.g., ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, sexual minorities) and involving participants of different ages, genders, and nationalities.

Originally, the contact hypothesis was mainly tested with respect to specific outgroups (primary contact), in line with Allport's conceptualisation, according to which intergroup contact reduces prejudice towards the particular outgroup involved in the interaction (see Vezzali et al., 2021; Pettigrew, 2009). However, subsequent research began to highlight that the outcomes of contact are not limited to the group with which individuals interact directly.

Building on these insights, Pettigrew (2009) showed that the effects of intergroup contact can generalise to other outgroups with which no direct contact has occurred. This assumption defines the STE, which posits that positive contact with one outgroup fosters more favourable attitudes towards other outgroups not directly encountered (Pettigrew, 2009). This paradigm is particularly relevant given the impossibility of fostering positive contact with all outgroups in society, especially in multicultural contexts where the presence of multiple migrant groups makes it difficult to establish positive interactions with each of them (Berry, 2023). For this reason, the STE is considered one of the key frameworks for promoting social

harmony (Ünver et al., 2022), as it specifies the conditions under which individuals may develop generalised positive intergroup relations.

These assumptions identify the STE as one of the most promising framework for understanding acculturation processes in multicultural societies. Acculturation research alone cannot fully capture the mechanisms that promote intercultural adaptation among all migrant groups in multicultural contexts, since natives cannot realistically interact with every migrant community. The STE addresses this gap by focusing on the generalisation effect of contact, whereby interaction with a single migrant group enhances natives' acculturation processes towards other migrant outgroups not directly involved in the interaction. In this way, it can contribute to fostering intercultural adaptation and, ultimately, broader social harmony within multicultural societies, while also advancing our understanding of the antecedents of acculturation processes.

STE research has predominantly focused on the majority rather than the minority groups (Vezzali et al., 2021), a focus that is particularly relevant in the study of acculturation processes, which pointed out the significant role of natives in addressing acculturation processes (Sam & Berry, 2006; Berry, 1991; González & Brown, 2016). This body of work has involved a wide range of majority populations, including children (e.g., Vezzali et al., 2018), university students (e.g., Shook et al., 2016), and adults (e.g., Tausch et al., 2010). Such diversity of samples enhances the empirical robustness of the paradigm, which has also been applied across different outgroup categories, including, though not limited to, migrant groups. Nevertheless, most studies rely on cross-sectional designs (e.g., Schmid et al., 2012), with relatively few and limited experimental investigations (e.g., Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2021; Harwood et al., 2011). Consequently, the literature points to the need for future experimental research (Vezzali et al., 2021) to causally test how contact with specific outgroups fosters the generalisation of positive intergroup relations.

Additionally, the lack of applications of the STE framework to acculturation processes, both among natives and migrants, highlights the relevance of investigating natives' acculturation processes through this paradigm to address the issue related to intercultural adaptation within a multicultural context.

Most of the literature has primarily focused on outcomes related to attitudes towards various secondary outgroups (see Vezzali et al., 2021), and a number of studies have explored a wider spectrum of consequences that extend beyond the attitudinal dimension, such as emotional outcomes (e.g., Berger et al., 2016), social relations (e.g., Mark and Harris, 2012), as well as behavioural intentions (e.g., Vezzali et al., 2023). These findings highlight the significant role of the STE paradigm in addressing broader societal challenges.

Despite the substantial evidence of significant outcomes within this paradigm (Vezzali et al., 2021), relatively few studies have examined outcomes and processes that specifically address the intercultural adaptation of natives and migrants, such as natives' acculturation processes (which has emerged as a significant focus of acculturation research, Berry, 2019; Guerra et al., 2025; Te Lindert et al., 2022). While several studies have applied this paradigm to investigate positive outcomes in relation to migrant groups, these investigations have primarily focused on prejudice reduction (Vezzali et al., 2021), leaving more complex processes and outcomes related to the natives' acculturation processes largely unexplored. Notably, only Giovannini and Vezzali (2011) explored how intergroup contact can foster more inclusive acculturation preferences within the generalised paradigm. Specifically, Giovannini and Vezzali (2011) demonstrated the presence of a STE of contact quality with immigrant parents on positive teachers' acculturation preferences towards immigrant students. This finding supports the adaptation of the STE paradigm to acculturation preferences. Despite being a very valuable contribution in adapting the STE to acculturation processes, it focuses on a very specific setting, the school context, with particular actors (teachers and parents) and outcomes

that are directed towards children. Thus, while the study offers valuable evidence of the usefulness of applying the STE framework to acculturation, it does not provide strong grounds for systematically generalising this link to the broader understanding of natives' acculturation preferences. Moreover, given that the research was cross-sectional, it does not allow for causal inferences regarding the observed relationships.

Building on these limitations, research that applies the STE framework to natives' acculturation processes, such as natives' acculturation preferences, remains underrepresented, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive and systematic examination of these dynamics. In addressing this issue, the literature of STE provided several insights concerning the role of different variables (Vezzali et al., 2021) that can help in understanding how natives' acculturation processes can be enhanced in order to provide outcomes useful for a positive intercultural adaptation and a broader social harmony.

3.2. How Can Natives' Acculturation Processes Be Enhanced?

To understand how natives' acculturation processes can be enhanced within the STE paradigm, it is essential to first outline the main antecedents of these generalisation processes. The definition of the paradigm itself shows that intergroup contact represents the primary antecedent of it. However, intergroup contact is not a monolithic construct; rather, it encompasses different forms, most notably direct and indirect contact (see Dovidio et al., 2011; White et al., 2021). While direct contact represents the primary antecedent in generalisation processes (Lolliot et al., 2012), indirect forms of contact developed over time have also been shown to effectively promote STE processes (Ünver et al., 2022; Vezzali et al., 2021).

Pettigrew's 1997 work, together with the critiques by Paluck and Green 2009, highlights the importance of developing forms of contact that are less resource-demanding and more easily applied, even in segregated contexts. Specifically, the researchers pointed out that direct contact requires the physical presence of outgroup members, which entails considerable resource

investment and can be difficult to implement with groups that are underrepresented in a given context (see also Dovidio et al., 2011; White et al., 2021). Following these assumptions, several studies have explored the effectiveness of indirect forms of contact in promoting the generalisation of positive contact outcomes. Among them, the role of imagined contact (e.g., Harwood et al., 2011), vicarious contact (e.g., Joyce & Harwood, 2014), parasocial contact (e.g., mass-media contact, Rupa et al., 2022), and virtual reality contact (e.g., Tassinari et al., 2024) were addressed.

The imagined contact paradigm posits that merely imagining an interaction with an outgroup member can influence both implicit and explicit attitudes towards that specific group (Stathi & Crisp, 2008; Crisp & Turner, 2009). Harwood et al. (2011) further show that the effects of imagined contact can extend to outgroups with whom no direct imagined interaction has occurred, highlighting the role of similarity between the primary and secondary outgroups in the generalisation of effects.

Vicarious contact has also been shown to effectively promote STE. This form of contact involves observing positive interactions between ingroup and outgroup members (Mazziotta et al., 2011). Joyce and Harwood (2014) demonstrated that observing a positive interaction between a U.S. citizen engaged in border patrol and an illegal migrant fostered positive attitudes not only towards illegal migrants but also towards other outgroups.

Indirect forms of contact can also occur through the media, as positive or negative representations of a social group can shape attitudes towards that group and other outgroups (Schiappa et al., 2005). Rupa et al. (2022) found that positive representations of a primary outgroup can facilitate forgiveness not only towards that group but also towards secondary outgroups, highlighting the role of media in conveying positive or negative attitudes towards different social categories.

Finally, virtual reality contact has been proposed as a tool to simulate direct contact while maintaining high experimental control and replicability (Tassinari et al., 2024; Manfredi et al., *in press*). In this research, Tassinari and colleagues (2024) show that positive interactions with a primary outgroup avatar in a virtual environment improve attitudes not only towards that specific group but also towards secondary outgroups through the generalisation of attitudes.

Among the antecedents associated with different forms of indirect contact, imagined contact and mass-media contact have emerged as particularly valuable, largely because they are less resource-demanding compared to direct, face-to-face encounters (Crisp & Turner, 2009; Jacobs et al., 2018). Imagined contact, in particular, is especially suitable in contexts where individuals have limited or no opportunity to engage directly with members of diverse outgroups (Turner et al., 2007). By mentally simulating a positive interaction with an outgroup member, individuals can reduce anxiety and increase openness towards future encounters, thereby preparing the ground for more harmonious intergroup relations (Crisp & Turner, 2009; West et al., 2011).

Similarly, mass-media contact plays a crucial role in shaping contemporary intergroup attitudes (e.g., Van Klinger et al., 2015; Seate, 2017). Media portrayals of migrant groups, whether through news, films, or social platforms, can contribute to either reinforcing stereotypes or promoting more inclusive representations, affecting positive or negative attitudes towards them (e.g., Van Klinger et al., 2015; Seate, 2017).

For this reason, we expected these forms of indirect contact as potentially valuable antecedents of natives' acculturation processes within the STE paradigm. Moreover, because they require only limited resources, they offer accessible strategies for fostering more positive acculturation orientations among natives, even in contexts where traditional face-to-face contact is restricted or difficult to achieve.

However, although these antecedents have shown significant effects, their impact is generally subordinated to mediators in fostering the generalisation of contact outcomes (Vezzali et al., 2021; Ünver et al., 2022).

3.3 From Contact to Generalisation: The Role of Attitudes and Morality Perceptions.

Over time, several mediators and moderators⁴ have been examined to clarify the STE processes (e.g., Ünver et al., 2022) with Vezzali et al. (2021) systematising the former ones into three main categories: those involving the outgroup (e.g., attitudes towards the outgroup; Pettigrew, 2009; Harwood et al., 2011), those related to changes in perceptions of the ingroup (e.g., deprovincialization; Henschel & Derksen, 2023), and those concerning the self (e.g., Social Dominance Orientation; Shook et al., 2016).

The first category, outgroup-related mediators, has emerged as the most significant within the paradigm (see Vezzali et al., 2021). Within this category, two specific mediators have been identified as particularly relevant, each for distinct reasons.

Specifically, attitudes towards the outgroup have consistently emerged as central mediators in STE processes, both in cross-sectional and longitudinal designs (Pettigrew, 2009). This mediator accounts for the generalisation processes whereby attitudes formed towards a primary outgroup extend to secondary outgroups, reflecting the core assumption of the STE, that intergroup contact reduces prejudice across different groups (Pettigrew, 2009). However, although this mediator has raised several methodological concerns over time, such as common

⁴ Allport's (1954) "optimal conditions" for contact are considered ideal but not essential for positive intergroup outcomes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Later research identified stronger moderators, including the interaction frame (negative or positive), perceived group entitativity, and intergroup similarities in status, language, or religion (Meleady and Forder, 2019; Neji et al., 2021; Eller & Abrams, 2004). Group status, ideological orientations such as SDO, and perceived similarity between outgroups also shape contact effects (Schmid et al., 2012; Vezzali et al., 2018, 2019).

Additional moderators include moral credentials, initial prejudice, and perceived threat, which can weaken generalisation to secondary outgroups (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2020; Ünver et al., 2022). Finally, factors such as the valence and intimacy of contact, cognitive rigidity, and diversity beliefs influence whether contact fosters positive or negative outcomes (Boin et al., 2021). Despite their importance, the present research focuses instead on mediating processes, aiming to connect the STE framework with acculturation dynamics.

method variance due to the use of identical attitudinal measures for different target groups (Vezzali et al., 2021), it is still regarded as the main mediator within this paradigm. Thus, these mediators continue to justify their inclusion, as they capture the central mechanisms underlying the primary processes of STE (Pettigrew, 2009). For this reason, we expected that natives' acculturation preferences towards the primary outgroup could serve as an effective mediator in shaping their acculturation attitudes towards the secondary outgroup as well.

Alongside, a different, relatively new type of variable has more recently emerged as influential in shaping these generalisation processes: perceptions of outgroup morality.

The literature has also addressed the role of this variable as an antecedent of acculturation processes, both among natives and migrants (e.g., Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020; Kunst et al., 2025). Furthermore, moral evaluations of the outgroup have emerged as significant mediators within STE processes as well (e.g., Vezzali et al., 2020; Vezzali et al., 2023). These studies consistently show that moral perceptions of the primary outgroup are closely tied to intergroup contact experiences with it, suggesting that morality may function as a key mediating mechanism in shaping both attitudes (Vezzali et al., 2020) and behavioural intentions (Vezzali et al., 2023) towards secondary outgroups.

Recently, Vezzali and colleagues (2023) introduced a specific dimension of outgroup morality perception, i.e. moral distance, grounded in social comparison (Pacilli et al., 2016). This variable captures the extent of perceived moral similarity between the ingroup and the outgroup, building on the assumption that individuals tend to display ingroup favouritism with respect to their group's morality (Leach et al., 2007). Findings highlighted the pivotal role of perceived moral distance towards the primary outgroup in shaping intergroup dynamics: the smaller the perceived moral distance, the more individuals reported positive attitudes and behavioural intentions towards secondary outgroups. For this reason, we expected that moral perceptions of the outgroup would act as key mediators in shaping the effect of positive

intergroup contact on natives' acculturation processes. Moral evaluations are particularly crucial because they determine the extent to which natives consider migrants as morally aligned with the host society's values (e.g., Kunst et al., 2025; Bauman & Helzer, 2023). When migrants are perceived as moral, natives are more likely to adopt inclusive acculturation orientations, such as supporting cultural maintenance and fostering intercultural dialogue (e.g., Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020). Conversely, when migrants are perceived as immoral, natives may instead be inclined to endorse exclusionary or assimilationist preferences (e.g., Kunst et al., 2025). In this sense, intergroup contact emerges as particularly relevant, as it has the potential to shape these moral perceptions and, consequently, the broader orientations that natives develop towards migrants (Brambilla et al., 2013a).

Although previous research has demonstrated that perceptions of outgroup morality are relevant in shaping natives' acculturation processes towards migrants (e.g., Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020; Kunst et al., 2025), the specific role of moral distance remains largely overlooked, also within the STE paradigm (Vezzali et al., 2023). This points to the valuable contribution of further investigating morality perceptions, specifically moral distance, as mechanisms that may shape natives' acculturation processes towards migrants within this paradigm. Moreover, within the STE literature, only a limited number of studies have explicitly examined the influence of outgroup morality and moral distance (e.g., Vezzali et al., 2020; Vezzali et al., 2023). This underscores the need for additional research to clarify how moral evaluations of one migrant outgroup may generalise to attitudes and behaviours towards other, uninvolved migrant groups.

Specifically, taken together, the evidence and the gaps identified in the literature indicate that natives' acculturation orientations towards different migrant outgroups do not develop in isolation but are strongly shaped by both contact-based experiences and the ways in which migrants are morally perceived. In this way, moral perceptions appear particularly

central: they determine when cultural maintenance is considered as legitimate, when assimilationist pressures intensify, and how intercultural adaptation ultimately unfolds. In this sense, moral perceptions emerge as key mediators of positive intergroup contact, potentially capable of shaping these natives' acculturation processes in a generalised manner.

For this reason, focusing on morality provides a particularly valuable bridge between the acculturation literature and research on the generalisation of intergroup contact effects.

Conclusion

The STE provides a powerful theoretical framework for extending acculturation research, moving beyond dyadic intergroup relations (Pettigrew, 2009). By demonstrating how positive contact with one outgroup can generalise to others, the STE offers a promising lens through which to understand how natives' acculturation processes develop in complex multicultural contexts (Berry, 2023; Pettigrew, 2009). Although evidence has shown its effectiveness across a variety of groups and outcomes, research directly addressing natives' acculturation orientations within this paradigm remains scarce (Vezzali et al., 2021). This gap calls for more systematic and experimental investigations that clarify not only whether but also how STE processes contribute to the intercultural adaptation of migrants and natives. Importantly, as the following sections will expand, contact itself is not sufficient; its effects are filtered through specific psychological mechanisms. Among these, more recently, perceptions of outgroup morality have emerged as particularly crucial mediators. Examining these processes can shed new light on the pathways through which STE fosters inclusive natives' acculturation orientations and, ultimately, social harmony in multicultural societies.

Chapter 4

Morality: a Bridge for Fostering Social Harmony in Multicultural Societies

Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the role of moral perceptions in shaping intergroup processes and relations, with a particular focus on moral distance. Perceptions of morality are a central factor in guiding moral judgments and behaviours, and they are considered especially relevant in understanding intergroup dynamics between ingroup and outgroup members. Drawing on evidence from the STE and acculturation literature, this chapter highlights the importance of considering moral perceptions as a key mediator in shaping natives' acculturation processes within the STE framework. Specifically, the conceptualisation of moral perceptions related to social comparison, i.e., moral distance, has emerged as one of the most promising variables for addressing these processes given its essential role in shaping intergroup dynamics.

4.1 Morality as a Driving Force in Human Behaviour

One of the most relevant factors for understanding social behaviour is morality (Ellemers et al., 2023), understood as the set of principles and values that determine whether a behaviour is right or wrong (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). The study of this construct has a long-standing tradition, as it represents a significant factor guiding social perception and human behaviours (Ellemers et al., 2023).

Early research on social perception initially identified two fundamental dimensions, *warmth* and *competence*, as central in the evaluation of the self and others (Fiske et al., 2007). These dimensions originated as a response to two fundamental questions that shape human social experience: whether others' intentions are good or bad, and to what extent they are capable of achieving those intentions. *Competence* refers to the perceived ability and intelligence of individuals to achieve their goals, whereas *warmth* encompasses traits such as morality and sociability, reflecting their benevolence in social interactions (Fiske et al., 2007). The literature strongly supports the assumption that information concerning the benevolence of social entities (i.e. *warmth*) with whom we interact represents the most significant dimension in shaping our judgments (Brambilla and Leach 2014).

Building on this framework, more recent contributions (e.g., Ellemers et al., 2019; Brambilla et al., 2021) have argued for treating morality as a third, independent dimension, highlighting its distinctive role in impression formation, group evaluation, and the regulation of intra- and intergroup dynamics (Pagliaro, 2014). In this line of research, the *warmth* dimension has been further differentiated into *sociability*, reflecting the capacity to interact and cooperate with others, and *morality*, which refers to perceptions of trustworthiness, honesty, and sincerity (Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Leach et al., 2007).

These insights suggest that morality should be treated not as a subcomponent of *warmth* but as a distinct and central dimension in social evaluation processes (Brambilla & Leach, 2014)

and intergroup relations (Brambilla et al., 2013a). Specifically, the literature suggests that information concerning a social target's benevolence represents the most salient cue in social evaluation processes (Brambilla & Leach, 2014). Because individuals need to know the moral traits of those with whom they interact, their subsequent relationships largely depend on this initial assessment (Brambilla et al., 2013a). But how do we evaluate whether someone is moral or immoral?

Early theoretical models answered this question, focusing on the role of *reason* in shaping these moral judgments and actions (Kohlberg, 1975). Later, socio-intuitionist models highlighted how these processes are also affected by evolutionary, cultural, and individual developmental factors, which are difficult to modify through reasoning alone (Haidt, 2001; 2013). These approaches, however, overlooked the role of the social context in shaping moral judgments and decisions, particularly the influence of social identities and group norms (Bavel et al., 2023).

Since individuals live within social groups, their morality is inevitably determined in relation to their groups of belonging (Leach & Vliek, 2008; Ellemers et al., 2017). From this perspective, Ellemers and van den Bos (2012) argue that morality is rooted in group memberships and in the value associated with them (Ellemers et al., 2019), in line with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). What is considered “moral” in one group, for example, in a specific cultural context, may not be the same as in another one. In sum, while moral judgments are also influenced by individual factors (Haidt, 2001), collective identities play a crucial role in calibrating both moral evaluations and behaviours (Ellemers et al., 2023). In line with this assumption, Ellemers and van den Bos (2012) identified three core social functions of morality, each illustrating how social identities guide moral judgments and behaviour:

a) *Definition of personal and collective identity*: people tend to want to belong to groups they perceive as moral (Leach et al., 2007) and evaluate themselves in line with the moral standards of their group (Pagliaro, 2014). Specifically, studies by Leach and colleagues (2007) confirmed the centrality of the moral dimension in social evaluations, showing that people are motivated to belong to groups perceived as moral and, when identifying with them, strongly endorse their group's morality.

b) *Intragroup dynamics*: shared moral norms foster group coordination and cohesion, helping members calibrate their moral judgments (Pagliaro et al., 2011; Ellemers et al., 2008; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Rai and Fiske (2011) showed that moral norms shape social relations within groups. For instance, they argued that moral standards associated with hierarchy (e.g., respect for rules and authorities) can sometimes legitimate practices that would appear immoral when judged according to the standards of unity (e.g., care, sense of community). From this perspective, group coordination and cohesion require shared moral norms that prescribe how individuals should behave in order to achieve moral alignment.

c) *Intergroup relations*: morality plays a pivotal role in the evaluation of social groups (Leach et al., 2007). People generally prefer groups that share their moral values (Leach et al., 2007), while moral discrepancies are experienced as particularly threatening for the ingroups, often leading to avoidance of contact with those groups (Brambilla et al., 2013a) or to more explicit forms of derogation such as dehumanisation towards them (Pacilli et al., 2016). Following these assumptions, Brambilla et al. (2013a) showed that groups perceived as moral elicit stronger willingness to interact, since identifying others' intentions as benevolent or malevolent is essential for social exchange (Ellemers et al., 2023; Leach et al., 2007). Similarly, Pacilli and colleagues (2016) demonstrated that when moral distance separates ingroup and outgroup, ingroup favouritism can escalate into negative evaluations of the outgroup, culminating in processes of dehumanisation.

At the same time, what counts as “moral” is not universal: while values such as honesty, loyalty, and trustworthiness are widely endorsed in defining morality, their concrete meaning depends on group-specific standards (Ellemers & van den Bos, 2012; Ellemers et al., 2013; Pagliaro, 2014). Based on that, impressions of other individuals and groups are shaped by the perceived distance between one’s own moral standards and those of others (Bauman & Helzer, 2023).

These dynamics influence both judgments and behaviours: people tend to distance themselves from those they perceive as morally dissimilar (Skitka et al., 2005) and seek to interact with those who share their moral standards (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2023; Pagliaro et al., 2011). Additionally, because moral beliefs are often experienced as objective and universal rather than socially constructed (Skitka et al., 2005), they easily fuel polarisation and discrimination against groups perceived as less moral, damaging intergroup relations. For instance, cultural membership can act as a salient marker of moral stereotyping, reinforcing perceived distance towards other cultural groups that do not meet the same moral standards (Kubota et al., 2023). Specifically, in Western societies, moral stereotypes associated with Muslims often raise controversial dilemmas concerning the role of women, which are sometimes used to justify discrimination against these groups on moral grounds (Dixon et al., 2018; Verkuyten, 2013). Such moral differences become particularly relevant in the context of acculturation: when natives perceive certain cultural practices of other groups as immoral, they are less willing to accept their retention within the host society. Thus, moral similarity between cultural groups emerges as a crucial determinant of acculturation processes, as it shapes the extent to which others are accepted, namely, only when they are not perceived as morally threatening (e.g., Ordoñez-Carrasco et al., 2020).

In this way, moral impressions, and in particular moral differences, deeply affect how individuals and groups orient themselves towards one another (see also Pagliaro & Pacilli,

2025). The key challenge, therefore, is to understand how moral similarities between different groups can be fostered.

4.2 The Potential Role of Moral Distance in Intergroup Relations: Fostering Positive Contact to Promote Social Harmony in Multicultural Contexts

The concept of moral similarity and difference can be effectively captured by the notion of *moral distance*, as conceptualised by Pacilli et al. (2016). *Moral distance* refers to the perceived gap in morality between ingroup and outgroup, offering a valuable interpretative lens for understanding intergroup processes. Introduced by Pacilli et al. (2016), this perspective highlights the central role of morality in social comparison, emphasising that perceived similarity along this dimension can significantly shape intergroup dynamics.

At the core of this conceptualisation lies the idea that individuals tend to enhance the value of their own social group through processes of ingroup favouritism and positive distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Brewer, 2012), a tendency that becomes particularly pronounced when comparisons involve moral aspects (Ellemers et al., 2017; Leach et al., 2007). Moral distance, in this sense, differs from morality as a stereotype (Fiske et al., 2002; 2007), as it does not merely involve unilateral judgments about the outgroup but rather considers the relationship between ingroup and outgroup in comparative terms. This approach is especially effective because it enables a deeper evaluation of intergroup relations, moving beyond the simple attribution of stereotypical traits. It is plausible to assume that while morality conceptualised in terms of moral stereotypes largely derives from dispositional evaluations of others, moral comparison appears more flexible and sensitive to contextual influences, making it particularly relevant as it can be managed. Additionally, according to the Belief Congruence Theory (Rokeach & Rothman, 1965), perceived similarity, particularly moral similarity, represents one of the most influential social perceptions in fostering positive intergroup outcomes (Haidt et al., 2003; Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2023).

Recent studies have shown that lower moral distance is associated with reduced prejudice and a greater willingness to support the outgroup, including through collective action (Vezzali et al., 2023). Additionally, positive intergroup interaction emerged significantly in shaping morality perceptions of the outgroup (Vezzali et al., 2020; Brambilla et al., 2013a) and moral distance between the groups (Vezzali et al., 2023). Additionally, Vezzali et al. (2023) demonstrated that reduced moral distance between groups shapes intentions to promote collective action not only towards the primary outgroup but also towards secondary outgroups, within the STE paradigm. Social comparison thus emerges as a key factor in regulating both intergroup and intragroup relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), with important practical implications.

These outcomes can be explained by the evidence that moral similarity facilitates moral inclusion (Crimston et al., 2016), that is, the recognition of outgroup members as entitled to rights and treatments comparable to those reserved for the ingroup. The concept of moral inclusion and exclusion was elaborated by Opatow (1990), who argued that moral exclusion entails perceiving certain individuals or groups as falling outside the boundaries of moral principles. Those excluded from this “moral circle” are regarded as undeserving of moral treatment. However, these boundaries are not fixed. Research has shown that the boundaries of moral inclusion can be shifted, for instance, through intergroup contact (Bloom, 2010), thereby promoting positive outcomes such as increased prosocial behaviour toward these entities (Crimston et al., 2016).

Despite existing evidence on the role of intergroup contact in fostering perceptions of moral similarity (e.g., Vezzali et al., 2023), current studies are predominantly cross-sectional, which limits the possibility of drawing causal inferences about its impact on moral inclusion of the outgroup and the associated positive outcomes. To address this limitation, future research should adopt experimental designs to examine the role of this variable more rigorously, thereby

clarifying how positive acculturation orientations among natives towards outgroups can be promoted and how social harmony can be fostered within multicultural contexts. Additionally, the role of morality, conceptualised as a form of social comparison, still requires further investigation within the acculturation literature. Future research should test the extent to which these variables shape positive acculturation orientations among natives, starting from the assumption that ingroup favouritism on the moral dimension is attributed to one's own cultural group, and examining whether perceived moral similarities are effective in fostering more positive acculturation orientations towards migrant outgroups in a similar way as moral stereotypes (e.g., Ordoñez-Carrasco et al., 2020).

Building on these assumptions, and acknowledging the central role of morality in intergroup relations (Pacilli et al., 2016) and in natives' acculturation processes towards migrant outgroups (e.g., Ordoñez-Carrasco et al., 2020; Verkuyten, 2013), as well as the importance of intergroup contact in shaping moral similarities within a generalised framework (Vezzali et al., 2023), we expected morality, conceptualised in terms of social comparison, to function as a bridge for integrating the STE paradigm into the study of natives' acculturation.

Conclusion

The literature has consistently highlighted the centrality of morality in shaping social behaviour and intergroup dynamics (Pagliaro, 2014; Ellemers et al., 2023; Ellemers & van den Bos, 2012). Moral variables have emerged as significant within the STE paradigm (Vezzali et al., 2020; Vezzali et al., 2023) and in the broader field of acculturation (e.g., Ordoñez-Carrasco et al., 2020). However, despite this relevance, morality, particularly when conceptualised through the lens of social comparison, i.e. moral distance (Pacilli et al., 2016), has not yet been systematically examined in relation to the generalisation of natives' acculturation preferences. Given its theoretical and empirical importance across these literatures, exploring the role of moral distance offers a promising avenue for integrating the STE framework into the study of

acculturation, thereby clarifying how enhancing perception of moral similarities between groups can be the key to enhancing social harmony between natives and migrants.

Chapter 5

The Present Research: Integrating the Secondary Transfer Effect Paradigm into Natives' Acculturation Processes

Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the main theoretical framework guiding the research project, together with the specific objectives addressed in each of the proposed studies. We begin by highlighting the importance of integrating the STE paradigm into the study of natives' acculturation processes. The first goal of the project is therefore to adapt the STE paradigm to natives' acculturation preferences with a particular focus on examining the role of moral distance as a key mediating mechanism. This allows us to better understand how intergroup contact can shape natives' acculturation preferences towards different migrant groups. Building on this foundation, we then introduce a new potential mediator to further explain these processes, i.e. multicultural ideology. Finally, the project aims to move beyond attitudinal outcomes by investigating how natives' acculturation processes can be translated into actual behaviours that support migrants. Addressing this outcome is essential, as it sheds light on the practical implications of these processes for promoting social harmony and for understanding the extent to which intergroup contact and related mechanisms can foster meaningful societal change.

5.1 Theoretical Background and Research Question

In light of the increasing cultural diversity characterising contemporary Italy (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025) and the need for understanding useful ways to promote social harmony within this context (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination report, 2023; Berry, 2023), one of the main central objectives of social psychology remains particularly relevant today:

How can we achieve social harmony within the current multicultural context?

To address this research question, two bodies of literature that we have discussed in previous chapters are particularly significant: Intergroup Contact (see Allport, 1954) and Acculturation literature (see Berry, 2019). Both have highlighted the significant role of promoting positive interactions between social groups in addressing social harmony (Hässler et al., 2020; Lefringhausen et al., 2020; Kunst et al., 2021). However, they also present some limitations.

Traditional Intergroup Contact literature (primary contact, Allport, 1954) has examined how positive interactions with an outgroup, including but not only migrant groups, can improve attitudes towards that same group (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 2009). Less attention has been devoted to the processes through which the benefits of contact can generalise to other groups not directly involved in the interaction (Vezzali et al., 2021; Pettigrew, 2009), a limitation particularly relevant in multicultural contexts where people cannot realistically have contact with every migrant outgroup (Berry, 2023).

Research on acculturation preferences, conversely, has focused on the consequences of contact between natives and migrants, emphasising the crucial role of natives in shaping migrants' adaptation and intercultural adaptation (Berry, 2015; 2017), i.e., positive intergroup relations (González & Brown, 2016; Zagefka et al., 2023). Yet, this literature has often overlooked the antecedents that shape natives' acculturation preferences and has rarely

explored generalisation processes that might extend these orientations beyond a single migrant group.

In light of these gaps, it becomes essential to examine how contact can produce generalised outcomes that foster positive acculturation processes among natives across multiple migrant groups, essential in multicultural contexts (Berry, 2023) like Italy (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025), in order to achieve a broader social harmony.

The STE paradigm (Pettigrew, 2009) offers an innovative framework in addressing this issue. Developed within the contact literature, it shows that positive contact with one outgroup can extend to others not directly involved, thereby promoting broader social harmony. Integrating this paradigm into acculturation research allows us to capture more generalisable processes of natives' acculturation orientations towards migrant groups (González & Brown, 2016), useful to promote social harmony within multicultural societies (Berry, 2023).

Since STE processes are shaped by specific psychological mechanisms (Vezzali et al., 2021), the present project focuses on the role of moral perceptions as a pivotal mediator in shaping these processes. These have been identified as critical variables both within the STE paradigm (Vezzali et al., 2020; 2023) and in acculturation research (López-Rodríguez & Zagefka, 2015; Urbiola et al., 2021; Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020; Kunst et al., 2025). Particularly when framed as social comparison (Pacilli et al., 2016), moral perceptions are especially relevant for intergroup relations (Haidt et al., 2003; Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2023; Verkuyten, 2013; Vezzali et al., 2023) and may therefore provide a valuable link between the STE framework and natives' acculturation processes.

Based on these theoretical premises, the present research conducted four studies designed to test these assumptions.

5.2 The Present Studies

The present research consists of four studies designed to investigate natives' acculturation processes within the STE framework. The first three studies focus on examining the generalisation process through which intergroup contact, both experimentally manipulated and measured, shapes natives' acculturation preferences towards different migrant outgroups. In this process, we specifically test the mediating role of moral distance (Pacilli et al., 2016).

The primary goal was to examine generalised processes across different measures of acculturation preferences, thereby strengthening the validity of this paradigm in capturing generalised natives' acculturation orientations. Furthermore, building on evidence from the STE literature (see Vezzali et al., 2021), which highlights the use of different attitudinal measures as mediators to generalisation processes, we also include natives' acculturation preferences towards the primary outgroup as a second mediator in our model.

Subsequently, the final two studies were designed to address two distinct limitations within both the STE and acculturation literatures. The first limitation concerns the use of similar attitudinal measures as consecutive variables, specifically, as a second mediator and as an outcome, across different migrant outgroups. Although we employed different and even opposite acculturation preference measures for the two groups, these measures still capture similar attitudinal constructs. This prevents us from fully disentangling issues related to common method variance (see Vezzali et al., 2021). To overcome this limitation, after establishing the main STE processes on natives' acculturation preferences, we introduced a different second mediator. This approach not only reduces the risk of common method bias but also provides a novel explanatory mechanism beyond the sequential use of similarly attitudinal measures in this specific process.

For this reason, we selected multicultural ideology as the second mediator, given its role in shaping natives' acculturation processes (Sam & Berry, 2006; Berry & Kalin, 1995; Berry

& Ward, 2016) and its potential to function within STE processes in a manner similar to deprovincialisation (Henschel & Derksen, 2023; Henschel & Kötting, 2023). To pursue this aim, the fourth study was divided into two parts: one focused on adapting the revised version of the Multicultural Ideology Scale to the Italian context, and the other aimed at testing our main hypothesis.

Finally, the last study addressed a critical limitation shared by both the STE and acculturation literatures: the absence of behavioural measures in the investigation of acculturation generalised processes. While this limitation is particularly evident in the acculturation literature (Zagefka et al., 2023), it is also an underexplored outcome within the STE framework (see Vezzali et al., 2021; Ünver et al., 2022). Moreover, examining how these generalisation processes translate into concrete behaviours in favour of migrants offers important insights into the real-world efficacy of such processes and further supports the potential of the STE paradigm for investigating acculturation dynamics.

Chapter 6

The Secondary Transfer Effect of Natives' Acculturation Preferences: The Role of Moral Distance

General Introduction

The current multicultural scenario in Italy (Eurostat, 2024; Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025) requires the adoption of complex analytical paradigms to understand the processes shaping natives' acculturation preferences towards migrants. Acculturation theory has long provided the main conceptual framework for addressing these dynamics (Sam & Berry, 2006), emphasising the importance of studying natives' preferences in order to promote harmonious relations between cultural groups in contact (Zagefka et al., 2023; Sam & Berry, 2006). However, this approach presents some limitations: in particular, it proves less effective in analysing natives' generalised orientations on how different migrant groups should acculturate, especially in the Italian context, which is characterised by cultural heterogeneity (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025).

The presence of multiple migrant groups makes it necessary to adopt paradigms capable of capturing natives' acculturation processes in a more generalised way, rather than focusing on a single migrant outgroup. In this regard, the STE (Pettigrew, 2009) appears particularly promising. The STE allows researchers to examine how intergroup contact experiences with one specific migrant group can produce generalised positive effects towards other culturally distinct groups among natives, even in the absence of contact with them. In other words, this paradigm helps us understand the mechanisms through which natives develop positive acculturation preferences, such as support for migrants' cultural maintenance (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2012; Sam & Berry, 2006), even towards outgroups with whom they have not

interacted. This provides a useful tool for promoting broader social harmony while addressing the challenges of interacting with a plurality of groups.

A crucial aspect of the STE paradigm concerns the identification of mediators that account for these generalisation processes (Vezzali et al., 2021). Among the different factors investigated, morality has emerged as particularly relevant. Perceptions of morality have been found to play a decisive role both in explaining the effects of STE (Vezzali et al., 2020; 2023) and in fostering natives' support for migrants' cultural maintenance (e.g., Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020). However, the role of morality as a mediator in the generalisation of acculturation preferences across different migrant groups remains underexplored.

Furthermore, although moral stereotypes have already been linked to natives' acculturation preferences (e.g., Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020), the contribution of moral distance (Pacilli et al., 2016), defined as the comparative evaluation of morality attributed between ingroup and outgroup, remains insufficiently investigated. This concept has proven useful in the study of intergroup relations (Haidt et al., 2003; Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2023), and more recently, has been shown to play a mediating role within the STE framework (Vezzali et al., 2023).

In light of this, the first three studies aim to test whether the STE can be applied to natives' acculturation preferences towards two different migrant outgroups⁵, and whether perceived moral distance represents a key mediator in this process across three studies. The adopted models follow the classical STE paradigm structure, in which the final path represents the association between attitudes towards the primary outgroup and those towards the secondary outgroup (Vezzali et al., 2021). To minimise potential issues of common method

⁵ The selection of migrant categories was guided by classic contact theories, which identified ethnic prejudice as rooted in social categorisation processes that operate along the same lines as perceptual categorisation (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963; see also Hugenberg & Sacco, 2008). In this sense, the first cue enabling categorisation is perceptual salience. Consequently, focusing on migrant outgroups that embody stereotypically salient perceptual differences, proves particularly effective in avoiding the confounding effects of overlapping categorical and identity intersections.

variance between similar measures, the models incorporate two opposing dimensions of acculturation, capturing different native acculturation preferences in each study, thereby testing our hypotheses across multiple conceptualisations of acculturation preferences. Furthermore, each study employed a different experimental manipulation, respectively, imagined contact (Stathi & Crisp, 2008) and mass media contact manipulation (Schiappa et al., 2005), to examine potential causal relationships among the variables⁶, and to assess the effectiveness of two low-demanding-resource intergroup contact manipulations.

6.1 Study 1

Given the valuable contribution that the STE paradigm (Pettigrew, 2009) can offer in understanding how to achieve social harmony between natives and different migrant groups (Hässler et al., 2020), the first study examined the adaptation of the STE framework to natives' acculturation preferences, investigating how positive interaction with a primary migrant outgroup (Africans) shapes natives' acculturation preference toward a secondary migrant outgroup (Asians).

Specifically, the STE literature supports the idea that achieving social harmony requires fostering not only positive attitudes toward a specific outgroup but also toward other social categories, and that positive contact with a given outgroup can promote this attitudinal generalisation (Pettigrew, 2009). Although the paradigm has been applied to various social groups, including, but not limited to, migrants (see Vezzali et al., 2021), analyses of these generalisation processes should place stronger emphasis on the transfer of host society members' acculturation strategies. This attitudinal measure does not simply reflect a general positive or negative evaluation of migrants; rather, it captures the more specific dimension of how migrants should adapt to the new cultural context (Sam & Berry, 2006). Such specificity

⁶ The intergroup contact manipulation was effective in only one study, furthermore the other studies will be retained on a cross-sectional design.

is crucial when examining relations between two social groups engaged in a complex, bidirectional process of influence such as acculturation (Sam & Berry, 2006; Berry, 2015, 2017).

To understand social harmony between these groups, it is therefore essential to go beyond simple positive or negative evaluations of migrant outgroups and to consider natives' attitudes regarding how migrants should adjust to the new cultural environment (Lefringhausen et al., 2020; Kunst et al., 2021), particularly whether they should maintain their cultural traditions. This is important because relations between natives and migrants depend on how effective and supported migrants' acculturation and adaptation processes are (Sam & Berry, 2006). The intercultural relations literature identifies natives' support for integration strategies, those that promote both cultural maintenance of the heritage culture and adoption of the dominant culture, as the most beneficial for fostering reciprocal exchange and positive interactions between cultural groups (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2012; Sam & Berry, 2006).

However, given the presence of numerous migrant groups within the territory (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025), it is necessary to employ generalisation paradigms to assess the effectiveness of contact on natives' acculturation preferences without limiting the analysis to a single migrant group. For this reason, the STE paradigm is particularly relevant (Pettigrew, 2009). Specifically, the paradigm proposes attitudinal generalisation from the primary outgroup to the secondary one, mediated by similarly attitudes toward the primary outgroup, as the core mechanism driving these effects.

Nonetheless, research on STE and acculturation has highlighted the need to consider an additional variable that can shape these generalisation processes as well as natives' acculturation preferences: moral perceptions (Vezzali et al., 2020; 2023). Specifically, when natives perceive a migrant group as immoral, adopting integration strategies toward that group becomes threatening (Kunst et al., 2025; Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020). Within the STE

framework (Pettigrew, 2009), such perceptions can produce similar outcomes toward a secondary outgroup, discouraging integration and instead promoting assimilation strategies, that is, expecting migrants to adopt the dominant culture, which ultimately undermines intercultural relations (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2012).

For this reason, analysing the STE in natives' acculturation preferences requires accounting for the indirect role of natives' acculturation preferences toward the secondary outgroup as well as moral perceptions toward the primary outgroup, conceptualised in terms of social comparison, given the significant influence of this moral dimension on intergroup relations (Haidt et al., 2003; Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2023).

To examine these processes, we employed an experimental manipulation of positive imagined contact (Stathi & Crisp, 2008). However, this manipulation did not yield significant effects (see **Appendix 1A**). In light of these findings, we decided to analyse the data using a cross-sectional approach, employing as an exogenous variable the measure of contact quality collected prior to the manipulation (originally included as a control variable)⁷.

Additionally, the study examined natives' acculturation preferences, specifically, preferences for cultural maintenance versus cultural adoption, toward two different migrant categories (Africans and Asians), focusing on the private domains defined by the RAEM model (Navas et al., 2005). These domains are considered particularly relevant, as they are more stable and morally grounded (Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020) and offer a more meaningful framework for understanding intercultural relations (Mancini & Bottura, 2014). Within the RAEM, such private or central domains include family relationships, principles and values, religion, and social relations. Previous research has consistently shown a negative association within these domains between natives' preference for migrants to maintain their cultural traditions and their

⁷ Since the study involved measuring the same variables both before and after the manipulation, we were able to conduct cross-sectional analyses based on the pre-manipulation measures. For the specific hypotheses concerning the manipulation, the analyses carried out, and the discussion of the non-significant effects, we refer to Appendix 1A.

preference for migrants to adopt the dominant culture (Mancini et al., 2018; López-Rodríguez et al., 2015). Treating these two dimensions as continuous, therefore, provides a more nuanced and analytically robust representation of natives' acculturation attitudes, addressing a common limitation in prior literature, where acculturation strategies were often categorised solely for qualitative analyses (see Navas et al., 2007; Berry et al., 1989).

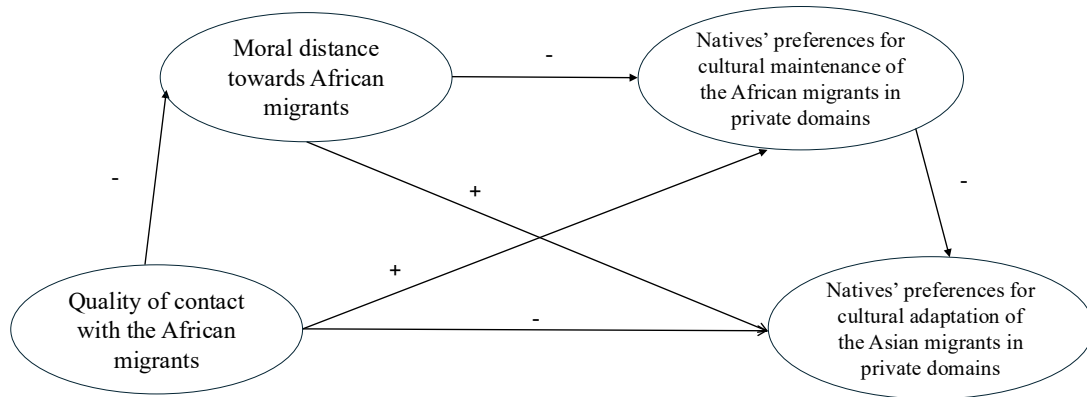
Moreover, given the negative association between cultural maintenance and cultural adoption preferences within private domains (Mancini et al., 2018; López-Rodríguez et al., 2015), we expected, based on the STE paradigm, that this pattern would generalise across different migrant groups. The STE framework posits that dominant-group attitudes tend to generalise across multiple outgroups (Pettigrew, 2009), suggesting that a similar association between these two acculturation-based attitudes should also emerge when natives evaluate different migrant categories.

In summary, we hypothesised that:

Positive contact with a primary migrant outgroup (Africans) is expected to be negatively associated with natives' preferences for the cultural adaptation of a secondary migrant outgroup within private domains (Asians), through a mediated process involving (a) natives' perceived moral distance towards the primary outgroup and (b) natives' acculturation preferences for cultural maintenance of that outgroup within the same domains.

The conceptual model is presented in **Figure 1a**.

Figure 1a. Conceptual Model



Methods

The present study involved a sample of 398 participants, recruited through a snowball procedure by students at Sapienza University of Rome. After providing informed consent for participation and data processing, in accordance with ethical standards in psychological research, participants completed an online questionnaire on Qualtrics.

Based on the inclusion criteria (following Lefringhausen & Marshall, 2016), which required Italian nationality and no migratory background, 21 participants who reported not being born in Italy and 33 participants with a second-generation migratory background were excluded. In addition, 23 individuals were removed because they failed the attention checks.

The final sample consisted of 321 participants, with a mean age of 21.5 years ($SD = 6.04$), ranging from 18 to 60 years. Of these, 55.14% identified as female, 44.55% as male, and 0.31% preferred not to indicate their gender. To examine gender as a potential covariate among these variables (e.g., Navarrete et al., 2010; Brylka et al., 2016; Vezzali et al., 2018), the only participant who chose not to disclose their gender was excluded from the previous analyses ($N = 320$)⁸.

⁸ Descriptive statistics excluding participant who did not disclose its gender: Mean age of 21.5 years ($SD = 6.04$), ranging from 18 to 60 years. Of these, 55.31% identified as female and 44.69% as male.

To determine the required sample size for our study, we conducted an a priori power analysis using the semPower package (Moshagen & Bader, 2024). An a priori power analysis based on the RMSEA approach ($F_0 = 0.28$; $df = 112$; $\alpha = .05$) indicated that a minimum sample size of $N = 214$ was required to detect a model with $RMSEA = .05$ with 95% power ($1 - \beta = .95$), thereby ensuring adequate sensitivity to evaluate the model fit.

In addition, to assess the adequacy of our model in detecting structural relationships, we also conducted a priori power analysis for the estimation of indirect effects. Specifically, the required sample size was estimated through a Monte Carlo Power Analysis for Indirect Effects (Schoemann et al., 2017). This analysis, applied to a serial mediation model, indicated that a sample of 302 participants was necessary to achieve a power of .80, assuming a standardised regression coefficient of 0.20 (following Vezzali et al., 2023; López-Rodríguez & Zagefka, 2015), standard deviations of 1, 2000 Monte Carlo draws, 1000 replications and a 95% confidence level.

Measures

Following the socio-demographic questions, participants responded to items concerning the following measures:

Quality of contact with African migrants. The quality of contact with African migrants was assessed using the scale proposed by Capozza et al. (2013). Participants were asked to indicate the quality of their contact with African migrants on a bipolar scale (e.g., hostile/friendly) using a response format ranging from 1 = very (negative pole) to 5 = very (positive pole). The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.90$).

Perceived moral distance towards African migrants. Perceived moral distance towards African migrants was measured using the scale proposed by Pacilli et al. (2016). Participants were asked to indicate the degree of perceived moral distance between African migrants and Italians, across four moral dimensions (i.e., trustworthiness, sincerity, loyalty, and morality) on

a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much. The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.93$).

Maintenance of African migrants' culture in private domains. Maintenance of African migrants' culture in private domains was assessed using the scale proposed by Navas et al. (2005), consisting of four items. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they wished African migrants to maintain their culture of origin in relation to domains describing family relationships, principles and values, religion, and social relations, on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much. The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.82$).

Adoption of Italian culture by African migrants in private domains. Adoption of Italian culture by African migrants in private domains was measured using the scale proposed by Navas et al. (2005), consisting of four items. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they wished African migrants to adopt Italian culture in relation to domains describing family relationships, principles and values, religion, and social relations, on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much. The scale showed low reliability ($\omega = 0.55$)⁹.

Analyses

All analyses were conducted using R Studio (R Core, 2024). Descriptive analyses were first performed, and the variables showed acceptable skewness and kurtosis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Subsequently, bivariate correlations were conducted to examine the associations among the variables, including age and gender (**Table 1a**).

Table 1a. *Bivariate Correlations*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. QC	3.82	0.82	-					
2. MD	2.08	0.87	-0.21***	-				
3. CM	3.65	0.88	0.28***	-0.34***	-			

⁹ Considering that the reliability of the measure was not sufficiently high, in this study we used structural equation models, which will allow us to assess the adequacy of the measure more accurately than traditional reliability analysis.

4. CA	2.76	0.94	-0.08	0.14*	-0.26***	-		
5. Gender	-	-	-0.09	0.09	-0.16**	0.15**	-	
6. Age	21.53	6.05	-0.04	-0.03	-0.05	-0.01	0.02	-

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. QC = Quality of contact with the African migrants, MD = Moral distance towards African migrants, CM = Natives' preferences for cultural maintenance of the African migrants in private domains, CA = Natives' preferences for cultural adaptation of the Asian migrants in private domains.

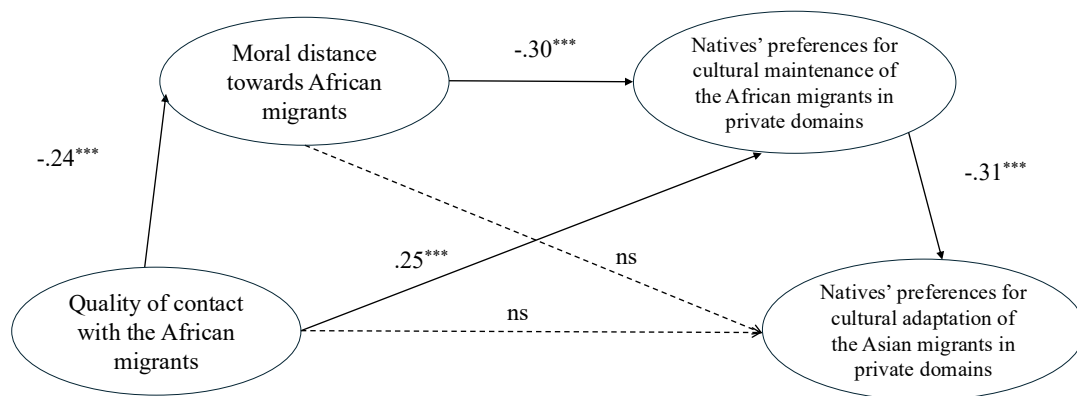
Finally, we conducted a structural equation model (SEM) using the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) to test the proposed hypotheses and examine the structural relationships among the latent variables, as well as to assess the adequacy of the measures employed, particularly relevant given the low reliability observed for the measure assessing natives' preferences for the cultural adaptation of Asian migrants in private domains. Moreover, considering the correlations and the significant association of gender with some of the variables of interest, gender was included as a covariate in the proposed model. The SEM was estimated using Maximum Likelihood (ML), with Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) applied to handle missing values (i.e., 1). Model fit was evaluated using the following indices: incremental or comparative fit indices (TLI, CFI), approximate fit indices (RMSEA), and standardised residual-based fit indices (SRMR). Thresholds indicating adequate model fit were set as $TLI > 0.90$, $CFI > 0.95$, $RMSEA \leq 0.06$, and $SRMR \leq 0.08$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016).

Results

The tested model showed satisfactory fit ($\chi^2 (112) = 256.135$, $p < 0.001$; $CFI = 0.948$; $TLI = 0.937$; $RMSEA = 0.063$, 90% CI [0.053, 0.074], $SRMR = 0.052$), indicating that the proposed structural and measurement model with the specified latent variables adequately fit the data. Moreover, all loadings were adequate for their respective latent factors, highlighting that even the measure which had shown low reliability proved to be appropriate for assessing the proposed latent construct.

The structural relationships among the variables (**Figure 2a**) provide partial support for our hypotheses. Specifically, positive contact with African migrants was negatively associated with perceived moral distance towards the same group ($\beta = -0.24, p < 0.001$) and positively associated with natives' preferences for the maintenance of the outgroup's culture in private domains ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.001$). Additionally, perceived moral distance towards African migrants was negatively associated with natives' preferences for the maintenance of African migrants' culture in private domains ($\beta = -0.30, p < 0.001$). Finally, natives' preferences for maintaining African migrants' culture in private domains were negatively associated with their preferences for the adaptation of Asian migrants' culture in private domains ($\beta = -0.31, p < 0.001$). No significant associations emerged between perceived moral distance towards African migrants and natives' preferences for the adaptation of Asian migrants' culture in private domains ($\beta = 0.02, p = 0.818$), nor between the quality of contact with African migrants and this outcome ($\beta = 0.01, p = 0.901$). The model accounted for 11.6% of the variance in the dependent variable, relatively small but significant.

Figure 2a. Structural Relations



Note: $^{***} p < 0.001$. The dashed line represents the absence of a significant association between the variables.

Subsequently, we estimated the indirect effects of the hypothesised structural relationships using the Monte Carlo Confidence Interval for Indirect Effects method with 50,000 repetitions (Preacher & Selig, 2012). Results revealed a significant serial indirect effect

of the quality of contact with African migrants on natives' preferences for the adaptation of Asian migrants' culture in private domains, through perceived moral distance towards African migrants and natives' preferences for the maintenance of African migrants' culture in private domains. A significant simple indirect effect also emerged for the quality of contact with African migrants on natives' preferences for the adaptation of Asian migrants' culture in private domains through natives' preferences for the maintenance of African migrants' culture in private domains. By contrast, the simple indirect effect through perceived moral distance towards African migrants was not significant as well as the total effect. The indirect effects are summarised in **Table 2a**.

Table 2a. Monte Carlo 95% C.Is. Indirect effects

Indirect Effects	95% CI		
	β	Lower	Upper
QC → MD → CM → CA	-0.02	-0.04	-0.01
QC → CM → CA	-0.08	-0.14	-0.03
QC → MD → CA	-0.00	-0.04	0.03
Total Effect	-0.09	-0.22	0.03

Note: QC = Quality of contact with the African migrants, MD=Moral distance towards African migrants, CM = Natives' preferences for cultural maintenance of the African migrants in private domains, CA =Natives' preferences for cultural adaptation of the Asian migrants in private domains.

Discussion

The present study sought to investigate whether the STE paradigm can be adapted to the generalisation of natives' acculturation processes, with a particular focus on their acculturation preferences. Building on previous evidence that highlights the central role of morality as a

mediator in STE processes (Vezzali et al., 2021; Vezzali et al., 2023) and as an antecedent of acculturation orientations (e.g., Kunst et al., 2025), we examined a specific moral dimension, moral distance, which is especially relevant in the context of intergroup relations (Haidt et al., 2003) but has not yet been explored in relation to natives' acculturation preferences. Moreover, we investigated whether natives' acculturation preferences towards the primary outgroup mediate their preferences towards a secondary outgroup, in line with the core assumption of the STE paradigm (Pettigrew, 2009).

Results from this study confirmed the presence of an STE effect, that is, a generalisation of natives' acculturation preferences, also through the indirect effect of natives' perception of moral distance towards the primary outgroup. Specifically, qualitatively positive contact with African migrants was negatively associated with natives' preferences for the cultural adaptation of Asian migrants in private domains, through the perception of moral distance towards African migrants and natives' preferences for the cultural maintenance of African migrants in private domains. These findings highlight that the moral dimension is a significant primary mediator, but that an additional mediator related to attitudinal dimensions is necessary for generalisation to occur, in line with the STE literature (see Vezzali et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the significant indirect effects support our hypotheses on the adaptability of the STE paradigm, highlighting the role of moral distance.

This study, however, is not without limitations. First, its cross-sectional nature does not allow us to draw causal inferences about the associations among the examined variables. Although an imagined contact manipulation was included, it did not yield significant results in relation to the variables of interest. Future research will employ other experimental designs, modifying this manipulation to enhance its impact and exploring alternative ones to investigate causal relations of the associations. Second, this study did not measure the quality of prior contact with Asian migrants. However, since previous research shows that findings remain

valid when this variable is controlled for (e.g., Tausch et al., 2010), we are confident that the results would not change. In addition, this study provides only initial evidence of the applicability of the STE paradigm to natives' acculturation preferences and employed only one of the possible measures of acculturation preferences available in the literature. Future studies will further corroborate this pathway of results by incorporating measures that capture broader and more diverse dimensions of natives' acculturation preferences.

In conclusion, the study highlights the effectiveness of the STE paradigm in fostering more inclusive and positive acculturation preferences among natives, in contexts characterised by a high degree of cultural heterogeneity among migrant groups. These findings also underline the pivotal role of moral distance as a psychological mechanism through which intergroup contact shapes acculturation processes, a dimension that will be further explored in the following studies.

6.2 Study 2

The present study, in line with the general assumptions of our research, aims to extend the findings of Study 1 by testing the adaptability of the STE paradigm to natives' acculturation preferences. To this end, we adopted a similar model from Study 1, but employing different measures of acculturation preferences and introducing a distinct manipulation to elicit positive contact, namely mass media contact.

Mass media represent a powerful channel for social representation (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2015; Van Klingeren et al., 2015; Seate, 2017), particularly with respect to migrants in Italy (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025). Psychological research has widely investigated, including through experimental designs, the impact of media exposure on people's emotions, attitudes, and behaviours towards represented groups (see Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2015). The majority of these studies have emphasised the negative effects of media, especially in the domain of intergroup relations (Arendt, 2013), showing how mass media often disseminate distorted and stereotypical portrayals of outgroups such as migrants (Seate & Mastro, 2017).

At the same time, media can also foster positive outcomes (Green & Brock, 2000), for example, by providing information that enhances more favourable perceptions of outgroups (e.g., Power et al., 1996). Nevertheless, research on the positive effects of media exposure remains limited (Janković & Čehajić-Clancy, 2021), and even less attention has been devoted to the role of moral or immoral representations of outgroups in shaping intergroup dynamics.

Morality is a key dimension in intergroup relations (Brambilla et al., 2013a, 2013b), yet it has predominantly been studied through exposure to "moral exemplars" (e.g., Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2020), leaving unexplored the role of moral framing in mass media ingroup-outgroup contact. A relevant contribution comes from Čehajić-Clancy and Bilewicz (2017), who demonstrated that portraying moral interactions between ingroup and outgroup members can promote reconciliation in post-conflict contexts. Their experimental manipulation,

exposure to media content representing outgroups engaging in moral interactions with the ingroup, led to reduced intergroup anxiety, increased willingness for future contact, and enhanced perceptions of outgroup humanity. Although these findings highlight the potential of mass media contact to improve intergroup relations, its role in shaping natives' acculturation preferences, such as their support for migrants' cultural maintenance or assimilation, has yet to be examined.

Given the centrality of morality in influencing natives' attitudes and intergroup relations with migrants (López-Rodríguez et al., 2015; Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020), we hypothesised that exposure to media content depicting moral interactions between groups would also affect natives' acculturation preferences. Importantly, such a manipulation does not simply present migrants as moral individuals; it situates them within a vicarious contact framework (i.e., observing positive intergroup interactions; see Mazziotta et al., 2011). By depicting moral interactions between ingroup and outgroup members, this approach both conveys a positive moral image of the outgroup and emphasises moral similarities across groups, an element considered crucial for fostering more harmonious intergroup relations (Haidt et al., 2003; Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2023). Perceiving migrants as morally similar to the ingroup may lead natives to view their cultural practices as non-threatening and therefore legitimate to preserve (see Kunst et al., 2025). In this way, morality becomes a lens through which natives interpret migrants and their cultural values: when groups are seen as morally aligned, they are more likely to be perceived as sharing common values, and their cultural practices as compatible. For this reason, the present study employs a mass media contact manipulation that integrates a moral framework into depictions of ingroup–outgroup interactions.

The hypotheses are as follows:

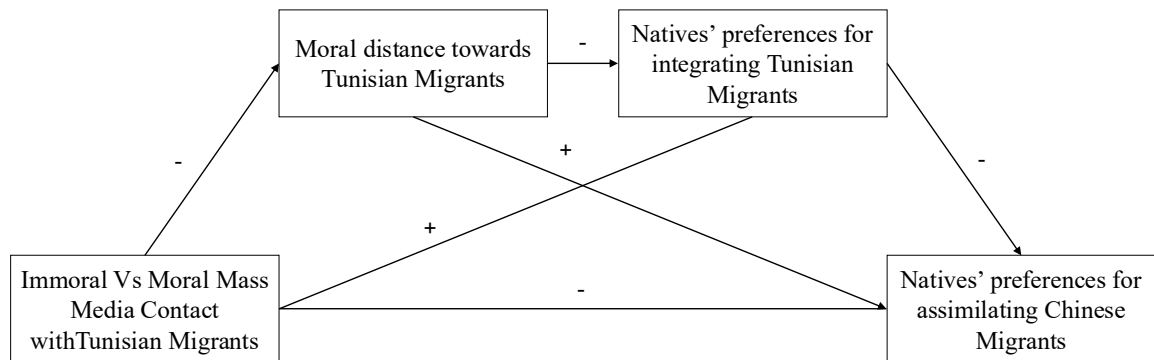
(a) Exposure to a moral interaction between the ingroup and the primary outgroup (Tunisian migrants) via mass media is expected to reduce natives' perceived moral

distance towards that outgroup, which in turn will promote natives' preferences for integrating this group and decrease their preferences for assimilating the secondary outgroup (Chinese migrants).

(b) Conversely, exposure to an immoral interaction between the ingroup and the primary outgroup (Tunisian migrants) via mass media is expected to increase perceived moral distance towards that outgroup, which in turn will shape natives' preferences for integrating this group and their preferences for assimilating the secondary outgroup (Chinese migrants).

The conceptual model is presented in **Figure 1b**.

Figure 1b. *Conceptual Model*



Note 0=Immoral Mass Media Contact; 1=Moral Mass Media Contact

Methods

The present study involved a sample of 240 participants recruited through the Prolific platform. After providing informed consent for participation and data processing, in accordance with ethical standards for psychological research, participants completed an online questionnaire on Qualtrics. Compensation was set at £6.00 per hour.

Based on the inclusion criteria (following those of Study 1), which were Italian nationality and no migrant background, 16 participants with a second-generation migrant background were excluded. The final sample consisted of 224 participants, with a mean age of

37.58 (SD = 10.47), ranging from 21 to 66 years, of whom 50.45% identified as female and 49.55% as male. Attention was assessed through dedicated attention-check items.

To determine the required sample size for our study, we conducted an a priori power analysis based on the regression coefficients obtained in Study 1. Specifically, sample size estimation was carried out using the Monte Carlo Power Analysis for Indirect Effects method (Schoemann et al., 2017). Given that the study involves the estimation of a serial mediation model, the analysis indicated that a minimum of 176 participants would be required to achieve a power of .80. This estimation was based on the standardised regression coefficients observed in Study 1, assuming standard deviations of 1, with 2.000 Monte Carlo draws, 1.000 replications, and a 95% confidence level.

Additionally, a power analysis was conducted to estimate the required sample size for detecting the effects of the manipulation on the variables of interest. This analysis, performed using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), indicated that a sample of 246 participants would be needed to detect small-to-medium effects of the manipulation ($F = 0.20$) on the targeted variables. The effect size was derived from Janković and Čehajić-Clancy (2021).

Measures

After completing the socio-demographic questions, participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions of mass-media contact with a moral framework.

In the moral condition, participants read a newspaper article describing a moral act (i.e., a rescue) performed by a group of Tunisian migrants (primary outgroup) to help a group of Italian citizens. In the immoral condition, participants read a newspaper article describing an immoral act (i.e., a harmful act of vandalism) carried out by a group of Tunisian migrants (primary outgroup) against a group of Italian citizens. Finally, in the control condition,

participants read a newspaper article unrelated to intergroup relations, which described the seasonal blossoming of plants.

After reading the news article, participants were asked to provide a brief summary of its content and to answer manipulation-check questions, such as identifying the ethnicity of the people involved and recalling the main topic of the article. They were then asked to complete a measure assessing the quality of contact with the migrant group presented in the news (the same scale used in Study 1; Capozza et al., 2013; $\omega = .89$).

Subsequently, participants completed the following measures:

Perceived moral distance towards Tunisian migrants. Perceived moral distance was assessed with the same scale used in Study 1 (Pacilli et al., 2016; $\omega = .93$).

Preferences for the cultural integration of Tunisian migrants. Natives' preferences for integration were measured with a single item from the Host Community Acculturation Scale (Barrette et al., 2005). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed that Tunisian migrants should maintain their own culture while also adopting Italian culture, on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

Preferences for the cultural assimilation of Chinese migrants. Natives' preferences for assimilation were assessed with a single item from the Host Community Acculturation Scale (Barrette et al., 2005). Participants indicated their agreement with the statement that Chinese migrants should give up their culture of origin for the sake of adopting Italian culture, on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

Quality and quantity of contact with migrants. General quality and quantity of contact with migrants were measured using two items adapted from Barlow et al. (2012). For quantity, participants were asked: "How often do you have contact with people from other countries?" (1 = never, 5 = very often). For quality, they were asked: "How pleasant do you find your

encounters with people from other countries?" (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). Both items were included in the analyses as covariates.

Analyses

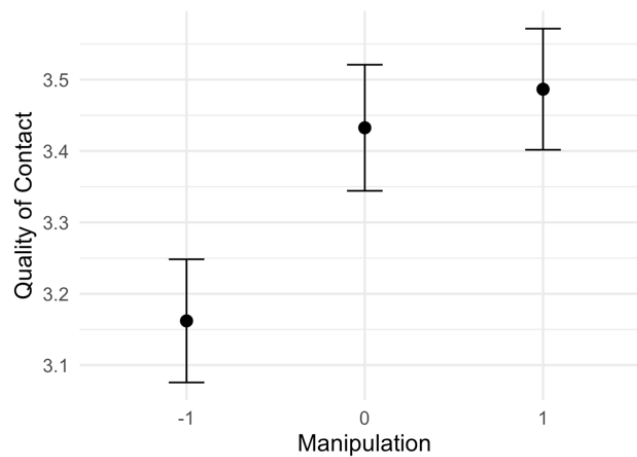
All analyses were conducted using R Studio (R Core, 2024). Descriptive analyses were first performed, and the variables showed acceptable skewness and kurtosis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Subsequently, we assessed the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation by first examining its effect on the quality of contact with Tunisian migrants (the control variable) and the other main variable of interest, which are moral distance and natives' acculturation preferences. To this end, we conducted an ANCOVA including participants' quantity and quality of contact with migrants in general as covariates.

Results revealed a significant effect of the manipulation, $F(2, 219) = 4.07, p = .018$, on the quality of contact with Tunisian migrants (the control variable). To examine which conditions significantly differed from each other, we investigated the pairwise differences with Tukey correction. As shown in **Table 1b** and **Figure 2b**, participants in the moral contact condition reported significantly higher levels of quality of contact compared to those in the immoral contact condition. However, no significant differences emerged between the experimental conditions and the control condition.

Table 1b. *Pairwise Contrasts for the Effect of Manipulation on Quality of Contact with Tunisian Migrants*

Contrast	Mean Difference	SE	df	t	p
Immoral Contact - Control Condition	-0.271	0.124	219	-2.18	.077
Immoral Contact - Moral Contact	-0.324	0.121	219	-2.68	.021
Control Condition - Moral Contact	-0.054	0.123	219	-0.44	.899

Figure 2b. *Mean Differences in Quality of Contact Across Experimental Conditions*



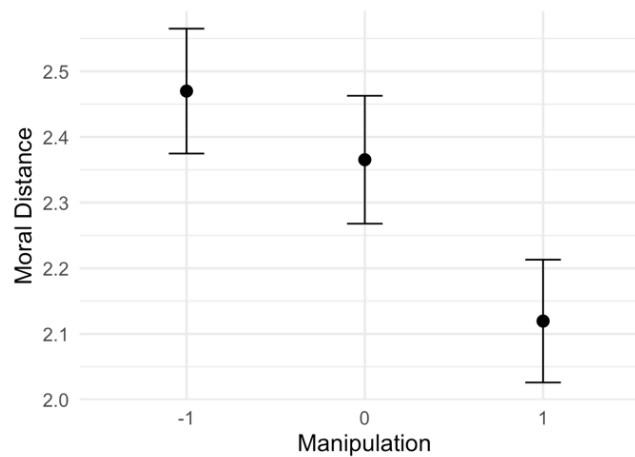
Note: -1= Immoral Condition; 0= Control Condition; 1= Moral Condition.

Subsequently, we investigate the main effect of the manipulation on all the variables of interest. A similar pattern emerged when examining the effects of the manipulation on perceived moral distance. The manipulation had a significant effect, $F(2, 219) = 3.65, p = .030$. However, consistent with the previous analysis, only the pairwise comparisons (with Tukey correction) between the immoral and moral contact conditions showed a significant decrease in perceived moral distance (see **Table 2b** and **Figure 3b**).

Table 2b. *Pairwise Contrasts for the Effect of the Manipulation on Moral Distance Towards Tunisian Migrants*

Contrast	Mean Difference	SE	df	t	p
Immoral Contact vs. Control Condition	0.105	0.137	219	0.76	.726
Immoral Contact vs. Moral Contact	0.350	0.133	219	2.63	.025
Control Condition vs. Control Condition	0.246	0.135	219	1.82	.167

Figure 3b. *Mean Differences in Moral Distance Across Experimental Conditions*



Note: -1= Immoral Condition; 0= Control Condition; 1= Moral Condition.

Lastly, when examining the effect of the manipulation on natives' preferences for integrating the primary outgroup (Tunisian migrants), $F(2, 219) = 0.83, p = .44$ and assimilating the secondary one (Chinese migrants), $F(2, 219) = 1.21, p = .30$, no significant effects were found. This pattern suggests the presence of an indirect effect, whereby the manipulation of mass media contact through a moral framework influences these variables via perceived moral distance.

The results indicate that a significant effect of the manipulation emerged only when comparing the moral versus immoral contact conditions on the control variable (i.e., quality of contact with Tunisian migrants) and natives' perceived moral distance towards Tunisian migrants. These findings are consistent with prior literature, which, although still limited, has primarily relied on contrasts between morality and immorality conditions to test the effectiveness of exposure to moral exemplars (e.g., Jankovic & Čehajić-Clancy, 2021).

In line with our theoretical assumptions and considering that the significant differences concern the comparison between the moral and immoral conditions, we deem it both methodologically and theoretically justified to focus our analysis and interpretation on this central contrast between moral frames. For this reason, we recoded our categorical variable into

two dummy variables: in the first, the morality condition (1) was contrasted with both the immorality and control conditions (0); in the second, the immorality condition (1) was contrasted with the control condition (0). To test our research hypotheses, we estimated two path analysis models using these dummy variables as independent predictors.

Before proceeding with the path analyses, we conducted bivariate correlations to examine the associations among the variables, including covariates related to the quality and quantity of contact with migrants in general, as well as age and gender, as we did in Study 1 (**Table 3b**).

Table 3b. Bivariate Correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>I</i>	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. IC (0-1)	-	-	-								
2. MC (0-1)	-	-	-.51***	-							
3. MD	2.32	0.85	0.13*	-0.15*	-						
4.NIT	5.49	1.54	-0.06	0.06	-0.33***	-					
5. NAC	2.33	1.51	0.09	-0.05	0.39***	-0.42***	-				
6.QTC	3.17	1.23	-0.09	-0.05	-0.17*	0.16*	-0.15*	-			
7. QLC	3.09	0.90	0.01	-0.05	-0.24***	0.34***	-0.32***	0.55***	-		
8. Gender	-	-	0.02	-0.04	0.09	-0.07	0.09	-0.14*	-0.16*	-	
9. Age	37.58	10.47	-0.03	-0.01	0.10	-0.1	0.21**	0.03	-0.09	-0.02	-

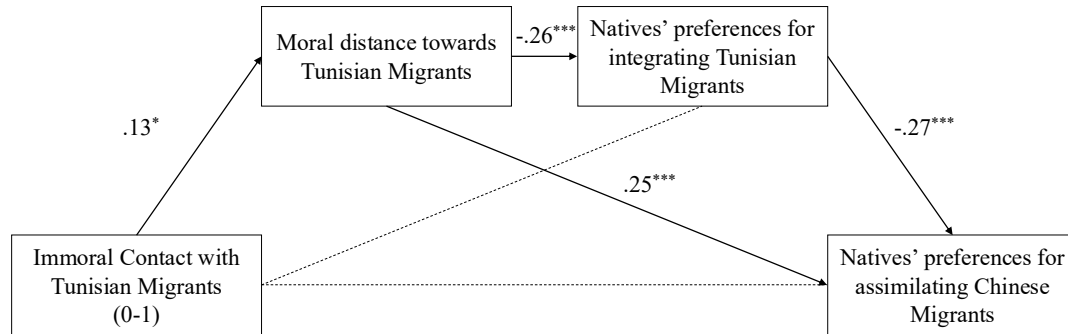
Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. IC=Immoral Contact with Tunisian migrants; MC=Moral Contact with Tunisian migrants; MD=Moral distance towards Tunisian migrants; NIT=Natives' preferences for integrating Tunisian migrants; NAC=Natives' preferences for assimilating Chinese migrants; QTC=Quantity of contact with migrants; QLC=Quality of contact with migrants.

Finally, we conducted the two path analyses using the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) to test our hypotheses and identify the structural relationships among the proposed variables, including as covariates the quality and quantity of contact with migrants in general, as well as age, since it was found to be significantly associated with our main outcome. The path analyses were estimated using Maximum Likelihood (ML) as the estimator, with Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) employed to handle missing values (i.e., 1). Model fit indices were not reported because a saturated model with observed variables was estimated.

Results

The structural relations (**Figure 4b**) for the model with the dummy variable related to immoral contact with Tunisian migrants showed a positive effect of the manipulation on natives' perceived moral distance towards that group ($\beta = 0.13, p = .045$). No significant effect emerged on natives' preferences for the integration of Tunisian migrants' culture ($\beta = -0.03, p = .581$) or for the assimilation of Chinese migrants ($\beta = 0.05, p = .382$), respectively the primary and the secondary outgroup. However, significant associations were found between perceived moral distance towards Tunisian migrants and natives' preferences for the integration of them ($\beta = -0.26, p < .001$) and the assimilation of Chinese migrants ($\beta = 0.25, p < .001$), respectively negative and positive. Finally, a negative association emerged between natives' preferences for the integration of Tunisian migrants and their preferences for the assimilation of Chinese migrants ($\beta = -0.27, p < .001$).

Figure 4b. *Structural Relations for the model with the dummy variable related to immoral contact with Tunisian migrants*



Note * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$. The dashed line represents the absence of a significant association between the variables.

Subsequently, we estimated the indirect effects of the hypothesised structural relationships using the Monte Carlo Confidence Interval for Indirect Effects with 50,000 repetitions (Preacher & Selig, 2012). Results, reported in **Table 4b**, revealed a significant serial indirect effect of the immoral contact manipulation with Tunisian migrants on natives' preferences for the assimilation of Chinese migrants through natives' perceived moral distance towards Tunisian migrants and preferences for their integration. A significant simple indirect effect of the immoral contact manipulation with Tunisian migrants on natives' preferences for the assimilation of Chinese migrants through natives' perceived moral distance towards Tunisian migrants also emerged. By contrast, the simple indirect effect of the immoral contact manipulation with Tunisian migrants on natives' preferences for the assimilation of Chinese migrants through preferences for the integration of Tunisian migrants was not significant as well as the total effect. The model explained 28.5% of the variance in the dependent variable. The results were reported in **Table 4b**.

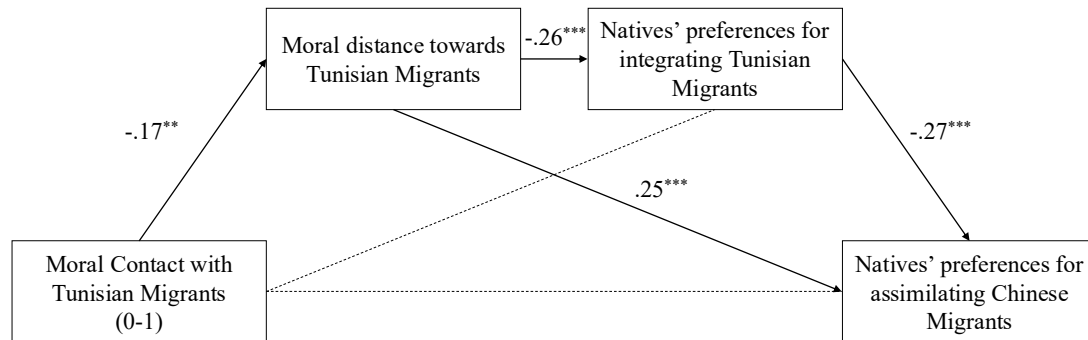
Table 4b. Monte Carlo 95% C.Is. Indirect effects for the model with the dummy variable related to immoral contact with Tunisian migrants

Indirect Effects	95% CI		
	β	Lower	Upper
IC → MD → NIT → NAC	0.01	0.00	0.02
IC → NIT → NAC	0.01	-0.02	0.04
IC → MD → NAC	0.03	0.00	0.07
Total Effect	0.10	-0.02	0.22

Note: IC=Immoral Contact with Tunisian migrants; MD=Moral distance towards Tunisian migrants; NIT=Natives' preferences for integrating Tunisian migrants; NAC=Natives' preferences for assimilating Chinese migrants

The second path model, which addressed the role of the dummy variable related to moral contact with Tunisian migrants, yielded results that were analogous but in the opposite direction in comparison with the first one. The structural relations (**Figure 5b**) among the variables showed a negative effect of the moral contact manipulation with Tunisian migrants and natives' perceived moral distance towards them ($\beta = -0.17, p = .009$). No significant effect emerged on natives' preferences for the integration of Tunisian migrants' culture ($\beta = 0.03, p = .625$) or on the assimilation of Chinese migrants ($\beta = -0.005, p = .926$). However, significant associations were found between perceived moral distance towards Tunisian migrants and natives' preferences for both the integration of Tunisian migrants ($\beta = -0.26, p < .001$) and the assimilation of Chinese migrants ($\beta = 0.25, p < .001$), respectively, negative and positive. Finally, a negative association emerged between natives' preferences for the integration of Tunisian migrants and their preferences for the assimilation of Chinese migrants ($\beta = -0.27, p < .001$).

Figure 5b. *Structural Relations for the model with the dummy variable related to moral contact with Tunisian migrants*



Note $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$. The dashed line represents the absence of a significant association between the variables.

Also in this case, the indirect effects tested using the Monte Carlo Confidence Interval for Indirect Effects with 50,000 repetitions (Preacher & Selig, 2012) revealed a significant serial indirect effect of the moral contact manipulation with Tunisian migrants on natives' preferences for the assimilation of Chinese migrants through natives' perceived moral distance towards Tunisian migrants and preferences for their integration. A significant simple indirect effect of the moral contact manipulation with Tunisian migrants on natives' preferences for the assimilation of Chinese migrants through natives' perceived moral distance towards Tunisian migrants also emerged. By contrast, the simple indirect effect of the moral contact manipulation with Tunisian migrants on natives' preferences for the assimilation of Chinese migrants through preferences for the integration of Tunisian migrants was not significant as well as the total effect. The model explained 28.3% of the variance in the dependent variable. The results were reported in **Table 6b**.

Table 6b. Monte Carlo 95% C.Is. Indirect effects for the model with the dummy variable related to moral contact with Tunisian migrants

Indirect Effects	95% CI		
	β	Lower	Upper
MC → MD → NIT → NAC	-0.01	-0.03	-0.00
MC → NIT → NAC	-0.01	-0.04	0.03
MC → MD → NAC	-0.04	-0.09	-0.01
Total Effect	-0.07	-0.19	0.05

Note: MC=Moral Contact with Tunisian migrants; MD=Moral distance towards Tunisian migrants; NIT=Natives' preferences for integrating Tunisian migrants; NAC=Natives' preferences for assimilating Chinese migrants

Discussion

The present study aims to deepen and strengthen the findings from Study 1 by testing the applicability of the STE paradigm to natives' acculturation preferences. To this end, an experimental manipulation of indirect contact via mass media was introduced, based on a moral framework, and measures of acculturation preferences different from those employed in the first study were adopted. The main goal was to show how this form of contact and the processes it triggers can influence natives' acculturation preferences, while also providing additional theoretical corroboration for the cross-sectional findings reported in Study 1.

Specifically, introducing this type of experimental manipulation is particularly relevant for two main reasons. First, individuals are routinely exposed to media content about migrants (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2015; Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025), so examining the impact of these daily stimuli can be useful for understanding their impact. Second, we argue that contact emphasising the moral dimensions of the outgroup may have a deeper impact, as it allows migrants to be perceived as morally similar to the ingroup and may lead natives to view their cultural practices as non-threatening and therefore legitimate to preserve (Kunst, 2025; Janković & Čehajić-Clancy, 2021).

The study's results confirm the existence of an STE paradigm in shaping natives' acculturation preferences in a manner analogous to Study 1, even when using different measures of acculturation preferences. Moreover, the present study provides evidence for the importance of moral-framed contact via mass media in promoting these processes. Unlike the previous study, in which the manipulation did not produce significant effects, the current study found an impact of this form of contact on the natives' perceived moral distance towards the outgroup involved within the manipulation (the primary outgroup). These perceptions proved to be a key element in facilitating the generalisation of acculturation preferences among natives.

However, the present study has some limitations. The first concerns the failure of the control manipulation, which did not differ statistically from the two experimental conditions. Nevertheless, contrasts between morality and immorality are typically adopted in the literature, and for this reason, we consider the evidence reliable (e.g., Jankovic & Cehajic-Clancy, 2021). However, future studies could employ alternative control manipulations to test the actual difference between the experimental and control conditions or consider larger samples to detect potential small effects.

A second limitation concerns the absence of a manipulation involving only contact, which would allow disentangling the specific roles of morality and contact in these processes. Previous studies have highlighted the central importance of morality in interactions between ingroup and outgroup members. Specifically, Čehajić-Clancy and Bilewicz (2017) demonstrated, across two experimental studies, that the morality framework is crucial for promoting post-conflict reconciliation, going beyond the effects of mere positive contact. Moreover, Čehajić-Clancy and Bilewicz (2020) further showed that exposure to moral exemplars from the past can serve as a form of parasocial contact to achieve the same outcome. Guided by this evidence, our study adopted a manipulation that differs from the parasocial contact paradigms used by these authors, who relied on video-based moral exemplars (Čehajić-

Clancy & Bilewicz, 2017) and intervention-based approaches (Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2020); however, it still places emphasis on moral content. Based on their findings, which highlight the stronger predictive role of morality compared to simple positive contact, we considered our manipulation appropriate for investigating these dynamics. Nonetheless, we recommend that future research include a condition involving contact alone, in order to more clearly isolate any potential spurious effects of contact within this type of manipulation.

Lastly, another limitation relates to the association between the secondary mediator and the outcome. Although no statistical evidence indicative of common method variance emerged (see Vezzali et al., 2021), a potential limitation lies in the choice of the secondary mediator. Specifically, this mediator reflects attitudes that are analogous, albeit opposite and directed towards a different group, to those measured for the primary outgroup, which may introduce bias due to the content similarity of the measures used, similar to Study 1.

To address this limitation, the next study included an alternative mediator operating at a more abstract or independent level relative to acculturation preferences, while still being theoretically relevant to the generalisation process, i.e. multicultural ideology. This approach would not only help reduce potential methodological biases but also provide further insight into the mechanisms through which STE processes develop.

In conclusion, the study highlights the effectiveness of the STE paradigm in promoting more inclusive and positive acculturation preferences among natives, emphasising the significant role that representations of positive interactions between natives and migrants in the media can play when the moral dimension is highlighted. The role of morality will be further explored in the following chapters, focusing on its contribution to broader ideological orientations and behavioural outcomes.

Chapter 7

When Morality Meets Diversity: The Secondary Transfer Effect of Natives' Acculturation Preferences.

General Introduction

Previous studies have shown the applicability of the STE in shaping natives' acculturation processes, particularly in shaping their acculturation preferences towards different migrant groups. In these studies, morality emerged as a key factor in two ways: first, as part of the experimental manipulation of indirect contact through mass media (which included a morality-based contact framework); and second, as natives' perception of moral distance towards the primary outgroup. When this perceived moral distance is reduced and a sense of moral similarity is established, natives tend to favour primary migrants' outgroups' cultural maintenance. At the same time, these preferences may indirectly weaken support for opposite orientations towards secondary migrant outgroups. In other words, when natives perceive moral similarity between their ingroup and a specific migrant outgroup, they may view that outgroup's cultural practices as non-threatening and therefore legitimate to preserve (Kunts, 2025). At the same time, this perception can discourage support for opposite acculturation practices directed towards other migrant outgroups, according to the STE hypothesis (see Vezzali et al., 2021).

However, these studies share a common limitation concerning the secondary mediator that was employed. Although no statistical evidence of common method variance was found (see Vezzali et al., 2021), this mediator (natives' acculturation preferences towards the primary outgroup) essentially reflects attitudes that are similar in content, albeit opposite in direction, to those assessed in the outcome variable (concerning the secondary outgroup). This overlap may introduce a bias arising from the content similarity of the measures.

To address this issue, the following studies introduce an additional secondary mediator, namely multicultural ideology (Stogianni et al., 2023). This addition allows us not only to reduce potential biases related to content similarity but also to explore, within the STE paradigm, the role of a new potential mediator that captures more global acculturation attitudes, rather than specific acculturation preferences.

Multicultural ideology reflects an inclusive attitudinal perspective on diversity, emphasising equality and valuing cultural differences (Stogianni et al., 2023; see also Berry et al., 1977; Berry & Kalin, 1995). This ideology entails a positive orientation towards the maintenance of migrants' cultures and their active participation in the broader society (Berry & Ward, 2016). In this sense, it supports integration (Sam & Berry, 2006; Berry & Ward, 2016) and contributes to reducing prejudice and discrimination, thereby fostering positive intercultural relations (Berry & Kalin, 1995).

To fully understand the origins of multicultural ideology, it is important to trace the different definitions that have been attributed to multiculturalism during the times (see Berry et al., 1977). The first definition is related to the demographic dimension of multiculturalism, referring to the ethnic composition of a society. The second definition is related to the political dimension of the construct, referring to government approaches and policies aimed at managing cultural diversity. Finally, the psychological definition conceptualises multiculturalism as an ideology that promotes acceptance of cultural diversity, the maintenance of cultural identities, and the social participation of all members in the larger society (Berry & Kalin, 1995). Within this last definition, the ideological dimension of multiculturalism emerges as a framework for understanding how positive intercultural relations can be fostered (Berry et al., 1977). Indeed, this construct reflects an inclusive vision of diversity, emphasising a society composed of different ethnocultural groups with equal rights regardless of size or power (Berry et al., 1977). In this perspective, cultural diversity is not merely a demographic characteristic or a matter of

policy, but rather a global evaluative orientation of citizens towards migrants and ethnocultural groups, playing a significant role in shaping positive intercultural relations in heterogeneous societies (Berry & Kalin, 1995).

Although multicultural ideology has been extensively studied over time, the increasing complexity of contemporary multicultural societies has posed new challenges to its conceptualisation and measurement (see Berry et al., 1977; Berry & Kalin, 1995). Berry et al. (1977) and Berry & Kalin (1995) developed the first Multicultural Ideology Scale (MCI) to measure individuals' beliefs about how ethnocultural groups should relate to the host society. Composed of 10 items, the scale was initially tested on a large Canadian sample and assessed key ideological orientations such as assimilation, segregation, and integration, as well as the impact of diversity on national unity.

However, to overcome the limitations of earlier conceptualisations and measurement tools in capturing multicultural ideology within increasingly diverse societies, Stogianni et al. (2023) developed a revised version, the Multicultural Ideology Scale–Revised (MCI-r), and emphasised the importance of examining it cross-culturally to identify potential contextual variations in both the conceptualisation and measurement of the construct.

For this reason, before employing it as a mediator to explain STE-related processes in natives' acculturation preferences, we conducted a preliminary study to evaluate the psychometric properties of the MCI-r in the Italian context.

7.1 Study 1a¹⁰

This study aims to examine the psychometric properties of the MCI-r in the Italian context, in order to assess the validity of the multicultural ideology construct proposed by Stogianni et al. (2023) within the Italian context and to contribute to the cross-cultural validation of the instrument.

The MCI-r developed by Stogianni et al. (2023) expands the conceptualisation proposed in the MCI scale by integrating both previously underrepresented dimensions and entirely new ones, structuring six subscales. The first one builds on Berry et al. (1977) and focuses on migrants' integration into the host society. Two additional dimensions address the impact of cultural diversity and the management of cultural differences between groups. These domains are captured by three subscales: Cultural Maintenance (CM), Equity/Inclusion (EQ), and Social Interaction (SI). Together, they reflect the integration strategy, emphasising the right of minority ethnic groups to preserve their cultural identity, equal participation in society, and opportunities for intercultural interaction. While earlier tools such as the original MCI (Berry et al., 1977) and the Multicultural Attitude Scale (MAS; Breugelmans & Van de Vijver, 2004) partially addressed these dimensions, the MCI-r systematically operationalises them. In addition, three new subscales were introduced: Extent of Differences (DI), Consequences of Diversity (CD), and Essentialist Boundaries (EB). DI assesses the perception of cultural differences between groups, EB measures essentialist beliefs about group distinctiveness, and CD explores conflictual relations among groups. These additions represent an important improvement, as research has shown their significant associations with acculturation preferences and attitudes towards migrants (Stogianni et al., 2023; Lefringhausen et al., 2024).

¹⁰ Parisse, C., Livi, S., Prislei, L., Marini, M., & Berry, J. W. (2025). Italian Adaptation of the Revised Multicultural Ideology Scale (MCI-r). *International Journal of Psychology*, 60(4), e70073.

Stogianni et al. (2023), Lefringhausen et al. (2024), and Chahar Mahali et al. (2025) examined the psychometric properties of the MCI-r across four samples (British, German, Luxembourgish, and Canadian). The first two studies confirmed only a four-factor solution, including CM, EQ, SI, and CD. Support for the six-factor solution emerged only in the psychometric assessment conducted by Chahar Mahali et al. (2025). However, these authors found that the four-factor model showed significantly better fit compared to the six-factor model. They also observed no association between DI and the other dimensions, and a negative association between EB and the remaining factors, suggesting, along with Stogianni et al. (2023), that these two dimensions may require revision or may not be relevant to multicultural ideology in certain contexts. These findings underscore the need, emphasised by Stogianni et al. (2023), to analyse the construct cross-culturally in order to identify potential contextual variations of the scale. For this reason, the main objective of the present study is to address the psychometric properties of the proposed scale within the Italian context.

To achieve this goal, the study initially conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to determine the most appropriate factor structure for the Italian context among those proposed in the original scale validation (Stogianni et al., 2023). Once the best-fitting factor structure was identified, the study proceeded to assess convergent validity using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), discriminant validity via the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT), and measurement invariance across genders for the selected factor solution. Specifically, the test of measurement invariance was motivated by prior evidence indicating greater support for multiculturalism among women (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003) and higher levels of prejudice towards migrants among men (Navarrete, McDonald, Molina, & Sidanius, 2010). Given the inconsistent evidence across different studies, Stogianni et al. (2023) recommended testing measurement invariance across genders in the validation of

the MCI-r. This approach allows us to evaluate the suitability and robustness of the proposed measure within the Italian context.

Methods

The study involved a sample of 301 Italian-born participants with a mean age of 29.9 years ($SD = 4.22$), of whom 48.8% identified as female, 49.2% as male, and 1.9% as non-binary. Participants were recruited via Prolific, and attention was monitored using attention check. They completed the online questionnaire on the Qualtrics platform and were compensated at a rate of £16.20 per hour. At the beginning of the survey, participants provided demographic information. In line with the inclusion criteria outlined by Stogianni et al. (2023), only participants born in Italy and native Italian speakers were included. For the gender invariance analyses, participants identifying as non-binary ($N = 6$) were excluded due to the small size of this subgroup¹¹.

To determine the required sample size, an a priori power analysis was conducted using the *semPower* package (Moshagen & Bader, 2024). The analysis, based on the RMSEA approach ($F_o = 0.59$; $df = 237$; $\alpha = .05$), indicated that a minimum sample of $N = 140$ was necessary to detect a model with $RMSEA = .05$ at 95% power ($1 - \beta = .95$), ensuring sufficient sensitivity to evaluate the model's fit.

Measures

Following the socio-demographic questions, participants responded to items concerning the MCI-r scale.

The MCI-r consisted of 24 items, initially translated using Brislin's (2000) back-translation procedure. Items, some of which were reverse-coded, were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale assessed attitudes across THE six dimensions: CM, SI, EQ, DI, CD ed EB.

¹¹ Descriptive statistics excluding participant who did not disclose its gender: Mean age of 29.9 years ($SD = 4.25$), of whom 50.2% identified as female, 49.8% as male.

Analyses

All analyses were conducted using R Studio (R Core, 2024). Preliminary analyses were first performed to assess the distribution of the data. Skewness and kurtosis indices were examined to ensure that the assumptions necessary for conducting the CFA were met (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Only the EQ dimension deviated from normality. Subsequently, a CFA was conducted with the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) using a robust estimator (MLM), following the procedure adopted by Stogianni et al. (2023) and for handling the normality deviation of the EQ dimension. Model fit was evaluated using incremental/comparative indices (TLI, CFI), approximation indices (RMSEA), and sample-based fit indices (SRMR). Differences in CFI were also used to identify the best-fitting model among those tested (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Criteria for adequate model fit were set as follows: $TLI > 0.90$, $CFI > 0.95$, $RMSEA \leq 0.06$, and $SRMR \leq 0.08$ (see Kline, 2016; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Following the CFA, tests of convergent and discriminant validity were conducted for the resulting factor solution using the AVE and the HTMT, respectively. AVE values greater than 0.50 indicate convergent validity, whereas HTMT values below 0.85 support discriminant validity (Cheung & Wang, 2017).

Finally, a multi-group CFA (MG-CFA) was conducted to examine measurement invariance across gender. MG-CFA is the standard method for investigating whether scales are invariant across these groups, as recommended by Stogianni et al. (2023). Three levels of invariance were tested: configural, metric, and scalar. Model comparisons were performed using both the Chi-square difference test (Byrne et al., 1989) and CFI difference-based tests (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), taking into account that the Chi-square test is sensitive to sample size.

Measurement Model

Initially, we conducted CFAs on the various factor structures proposed in the original validation by Stogianni et al. (2023), starting with the six-factor model with correlations among factors. However, the six-factor model showed poor fit indices and revealed no associations between the DI and EB dimensions and the other factors. Given the lack of correlation between DI and EB with the remaining dimensions, as also observed by Lefringhausen et al. (2024) and Stogianni et al. (2023), we tested a four-factor solution, excluding DI and EB.

The four-factor model showed good fit indices after excluding DI and EB. We then tested a one-factor solution to rule out the possibility that a nested model could better explain the data. This model, however, showed poor fit indices both in the full version and when DI and EB were removed. CFI difference comparisons confirmed that the four-factor solution, excluding DI and EB, provided the best fit.

We subsequently examined correlations among the factors (see **Table 2c**), which revealed positive associations, suggesting the presence of a potential second-order latent factor encompassing the four subdimensions. Based on this hypothesis, a hierarchical model was tested. The hierarchical four-factor second-order model, excluding DI and EB, also demonstrated good fit indices. Only marginal differences were observed between the four-factor solution and the second-order model. Consequently, the scale can be used either by considering the four dimensions separately or as a composite index calculated as the mean of the four subscale scores (i.e., MI). However, for subsequent analyses (convergent validity, discriminant validity, and measurement invariance), we retained the simpler four-factor model.

Finally, bifactor models were explored to evaluate both unidimensional and multidimensional structures. None of the bifactor models, whether including or excluding DI and EB, reached convergence. All fit indices for the factor solution models are reported in **Table 1c**, except for the bifactor models, which did not converge. Additionally, we assessed

the reliability of the factors emerging from the four-factor and hierarchical models using omega (ω) estimates, which indicated good reliability for each dimension and for the composite scale.

Finally, the factor loadings for the four-factor model are presented in **Figure 1c**.

Table 1c. Summarised model fits

Model	χ^2 (df)	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR	Δ CFI
Four-factor model including EB and DI	240.518 (98)	0.924	0.907	0.074 [0.062, 0.086]	0.051	-
Hierarchical four-factor model (EB and DI excluded)	245.377 (100)	0.922	0.907	0.074 [0.062, 0.086]	0.052	0.002
One-factor model	1401.942 (252)	0.571	0.530	0.131 [0.125, 0.138]	0.117	0.353
One-factor model (EB and DI excluded)	489.349 (104)	0.787	0.755	0.120 [0.110, 0.131]	0.077	0.137
Six-factor model with correlated factors	599.408 (237)	0.867	0.845	0.075 [0.068, 0.083]	0.101	0.057

Note: Δ CFI = difference in Comparative Fit Index; χ^2 (df) = Chi-square (degree of freedom); CFI = Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardised Root Mean Square Residual; TLI = Tucker–Lewis Index.

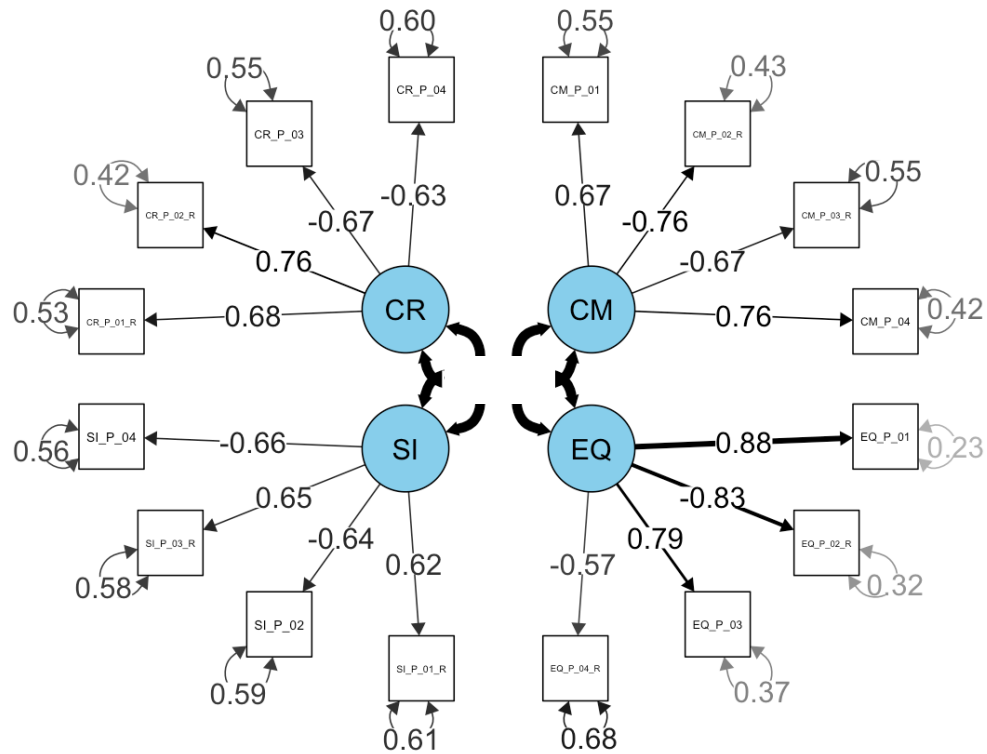
Table 2c. Correlations between factors

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	ω
1. CM	3.85	0.78	-				0.82
2. EQ	4.49	0.72	0.46***	-			0.88
3. SI	4.00	0.75	0.66***	0.58***	-		0.77
4. CD	3.60	0.85	0.66***	0.57***	0.71***	-	0.74
5. MI	3.98	0.65	-	-	-	-	0.88

Note: Correlations with the MI dimension were not calculated, as it is composed of the mean scores of the four subdimensions. CM = Cultural Maintenance; CR = Conflictual Relations; SI = Social Interaction; EQ = Equity/Inclusion.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1c. Factor loadings for the four-factor model



Note: CM = Cultural Maintenance; CR = Conflictual Relations; SI = Social Interaction; EQ = Equity/Inclusion

Convergent and Discriminant Validity

We assessed convergent validity using the AVE for the dimensions of the four-factor model (Cheung & Wang, 2017). Our results provided support for convergent validity for Cultural Maintenance (CM; AVE = 0.51) and Equity/Inclusion (EQ; AVE = 0.55), but not for Social Interaction (SI; AVE = 0.41) and Consequences of Diversity (CD; AVE = 0.48).

Subsequently, discriminant validity was examined using the HTMT for the same dimensions of the four-factor solution (Cheung & Wang, 2017). The results indicated discriminant validity for CM and EQ. The discriminant validity results are reported in **Table 3c**.

Table 3c. *Discriminant Validity*

Factor	1	2	3	4
1. CM	-			
2. EQ	0.555	-		
3. SI	0.834	0.736	-	
4. CD	0.829	0.712	0.939	-

Note: CM = Cultural Maintenance; CR = Conflictual Relations; SI = Social Interaction; EQ = Equity/Inclusion.

Measurement Invariance

The four-factor solution emerged as the best-fitting model, leading us to conduct a measurement invariance analysis across gender for this model. Three levels of invariance were examined: configural, metric, and scalar.

For configural invariance, fit indices suggested that the factor structure is invariant across females and males, indicating that the same factor structure is valid for both groups. Similarly, the indices for metric and scalar invariance indicated that both the strength of the relationships between observed variables and latent factors, as well as the factor means, are comparable across genders. Therefore, the most restrictive model can be accepted without issues.

The results supported all three levels of invariance, indicating no significant differences between males and females. A summary of the results is presented in **Table 4c**.

Table 4c. *Measurement Invariance Across Gender*

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	p ($\Delta\chi^2$)	CFI	ΔCFI
Configural Invariance	359.863	196	-	-	-	0.921	-
Metric Invariance	384.560	208	20.650	12	0.056	0.915	0.006
Scalar Invariance	394.630	220	11.338	12	0.500	0.916	0.005

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the adequacy of the multicultural ideology construct in the Italian context. Although Stogianni et al. (2023) proposed a revised conceptualisation and

measure to assess this construct, addressing the complexities of multicultural societies, the scale's psychometric properties appear to vary across cultural contexts (Lefringhausen et al., 2024; Chahar Mahali et al., 2025). This makes a confirmatory factor analysis necessary to determine which dimensions accurately capture the construct in different multicultural settings, as also suggested by Stogianni et al. (2023).

Accordingly, the present study sought to adapt the MCI-r for use in Italy, thereby contributing to the cross-cultural validation of the scale. The results of the first study confirmed the four-factor solution (excluding DI and EB), consistent with previous cross-cultural validations of the MCI-r (e.g., Lefringhausen et al., 2024). This suggests that these two subscales may require further refinement in future research or may be irrelevant in the Italian context and other countries where they were excluded.

Comparative analyses with alternative models considered the presence of a higher-order dimension underlying multicultural ideology. This overarching construct encompasses the four validated subdimensions, supporting the idea that multicultural ideology represents a broad framework shaping intergroup relations, in line with the original scale validation (e.g., Stogianni et al., 2023).

Moreover, the examination of convergent and discriminant validity partially confirmed the scale's effectiveness, particularly for the CM and EQ dimensions. These results suggest that while CM and EQ are well-defined and distinct, the SI and CD dimensions may require further refinement. The lower convergent validity of SI and CD indicates that the items may not fully capture the intended constructs, possibly due to item ambiguity or conceptual overlap with other dimensions.

These findings show some inconsistencies, as Stogianni et al. (2023) observed different convergent and discriminant validity patterns. This suggests that the four dimensions may vary slightly across cultural contexts in terms of convergent and discriminant validity.

Finally, the study established measurement invariance across gender, consistent with previous findings by Stogianni et al. (2023), allowing meaningful comparisons between males and females regarding multicultural attitudes, a dimension relatively underexplored in previous research.

Although this study makes an important contribution, several limitations should be noted. First, data were collected online, which may introduce sampling bias and limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should aim to replicate these results using more diverse and representative samples, as well as testing the model in additional populations. Second, the SI and CD dimensions showed weaker convergent validity, suggesting that current items may not fully capture the constructs or may involve conceptual overlaps that need revision.

Despite these limitations, the adaptation of the MCI-r provides a valuable tool for assessing multicultural attitudes in the Italian context, making it a useful variable for detecting the STE within natives' acculturation processes.

7.2 Study 3b

Having established the psychometric properties of the MCI-r in the Italian multicultural context, the present study aimed to investigate the role of multicultural ideology as a secondary mediator within the STE paradigm, specifically in relation to natives' acculturation preferences.

As noted earlier, multicultural ideology represents a broad attitudinal framework encompassing mutual respect for cultural differences and active support for equal opportunities between dominant and non-dominant groups (e.g., Berry & Kalin, 1995). The relationship between acculturation strategies and multicultural ideology is particularly strong, especially in the initial theorisation of the construct (Berry et al., 1977). The original MCI scale (Berry et al., 1977) was based on two dimensions paralleling the acculturation strategy model: cultural maintenance and contact/participation. While closely related, these constructs remain distinct: multicultural ideology reflects a more stable and overarching belief system, whereas acculturation strategies are more context-dependent and variable (Berry et al., 1977; Lefringhausen et al., 2024).

The directionality of the relationship between acculturation preferences and multicultural ideology is not yet fully understood. One longitudinal study suggested that acculturation preferences predict multicultural ideology (Lefringhausen et al., 2023), whereas cross-sectional studies theoretically support that multicultural ideology can shape acculturation preferences (e.g., Sam & Berry, 2006), as is typical for ideological variables. Unlike other ideologies, however, multicultural ideology is best understood as a general attitude grounded in inclusivity and equality. Contextual factors, such as intergroup contact, could shape it (Lefringhausen et al., 2024), while its relative stability can, in turn, shape context-specific variables like acculturation preferences (e.g., Sam & Berry, 2006). However, although longitudinal evidence has examined multicultural ideology as an outcome of acculturation preferences (Lefringhausen et al., 2024), within the STE paradigm, the relationship may

function differently, as acculturation preferences concern a secondary outgroup rather than the primary outgroup involved in the contact experience. Following this assumption, the STE literature has examined a related construct, namely cultural deprovincialization (Boin et al., 2020), supporting that a global openness to cultural diversity, within the STE paradigm, can be shaped by contact experiences, perceptions, and attitudes towards the primary outgroup, and can subsequently relate to attitudes and perceptions towards a secondary outgroup (see Vezzali et al., 2021; Henschel & Derksen, 2023; Henschel & Kötting, 2023). This framework thus supports the role of multicultural ideology as a potential secondary mediator in the STE, shaping natives' acculturation preferences towards a secondary outgroup.

Thus, the present study investigates how contextual factors, such as positive contact with the primary outgroup, shape natives' acculturation preferences towards a secondary outgroup through the positive association with of multicultural ideology. The literature indicates that positive contact can support multiculturalism and the embrace of diversity (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2006; Verkuyten et al., 2010). Accordingly, qualitatively positive contact emerges as a potential antecedent.

However, positive contact with culturally diverse individuals does not uniformly produce favourable outcomes, underscoring the importance of considering the specific characteristics of migrant groups present in a given context (e.g., Verkuyten, 2007a; 2007b). A critical factor in understanding support for multiculturalism is religion. In Europe, religious differences, particularly investigated in regard to Muslim migrant groups, have contributed to multiculturalism's perceived crisis (Modood & Ahmad, 2007; Verkuyten, 2007b). Thus, as Seul (1999) notes, religions provide moral frameworks, institutions, and traditions that fulfil fundamental needs related to psychological stability, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualisation. In line with this, certain religious practices are often perceived as conflicting with

Western moral values (Ellemers et al., 2023; Kubota et al., 2023), contributing to broader attitudes of support or rejection of multiculturalism (Dixon et al., 2018; Verkuyten, 2013).

Support for multicultural ideology relies on perceived moral compatibility: the more individuals perceive others' cultural and religious practices as morally congruent, the less threatening the multicultural context is perceived to be (Kunts, 2025). Morality, therefore, serves as a lens through which people evaluate the legitimacy of different cultural practices and decide whether to tolerate or reject them (Ellemers et al., 2023).

In sum, while positive contact with a primary outgroup may promote natives' multicultural ideology and, consequently, shape their acculturation preferences towards secondary outgroups, the effectiveness of this process partially may be related to the extent to which the contacted social category is perceived as morally similar.

Based on these assumptions, the present study aimed to examine the applicability of the STE on natives' acculturation preferences, investigating the role of moral distance in shaping multicultural ideology and, in turn, natives' acculturation processes.

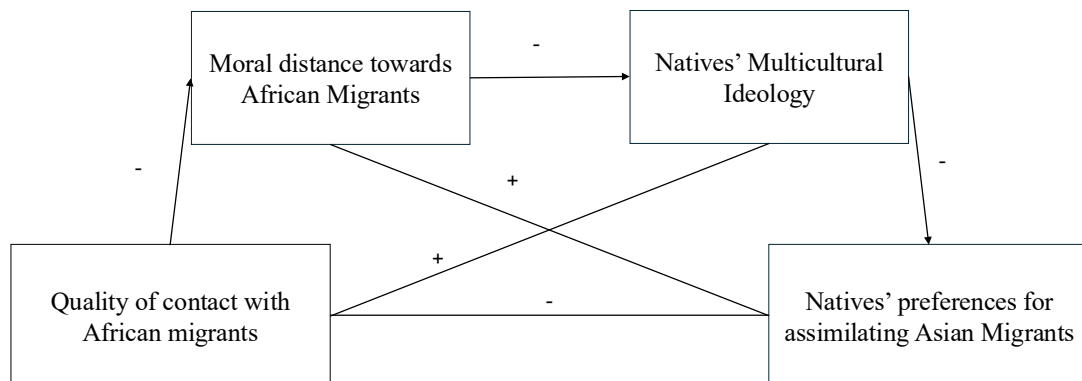
Accordingly, we hypothesised that:

Positive contact with a primary migrant outgroup (Africans) is expected to be negatively associated with natives' preferences for assimilating a secondary migrant outgroup (Asians), through a mediated process involving (a) natives' perceived moral distance towards the primary outgroup and (b) natives' multicultural ideology.

The conceptual model is presented in **Figure 1d**.

This study was initially designed as an experimental study, aiming to manipulate the quality of intergroup contact through the imagined contact paradigm (Stathi & Crisp, 2008). However, as in Study 1, the manipulation had no observable effect (see **Appendix 2A**). Therefore, the analyses were conducted using a cross-sectional approach employing the control measure related to quality of contact with the primary outgroup as the exogenous variable.

Figure 1d. Conceptual Model



Methods

The present study involved a sample of 300 participants recruited via the Prolific platform. After providing informed consent in accordance with ethical standards in psychological research, participants completed an online questionnaire on Qualtrics. Compensation was set at £6.00 per hour.

Based on the inclusion criteria of the previous studies, which required participants to be Italian nationals without a migration background, 23 participants with second-generation migration backgrounds were excluded. The sample, excluding participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria, consisted of 277 participants (mean age = 24.76, SD = 2.22; age range 18–28), of whom 48.74% were female, 49.82% male, and 1.44% did not report their gender. Due to the small number of participants who did not report their gender and given the role of gender as a covariate in previous studies, these participants were excluded from subsequent analyses. Thus, the final sample included 273 participants with an average age of 24.76 (SD = 2.22), ranging from 18 to 28, with 49.45% female and 50.55% male. The required sample size was the same as the one determined in Study 2.

Measures

Following the socio-demographic questions, participants responded to items concerning the following measures:

Quality of contact with African migrants. The quality of contact with African migrants was assessed with the same scale used in Study 1 (Capozza et al., 2013; $\omega = 0.82$).

Perceived moral distance towards African migrants. Perceived moral distance was assessed with the same scale used in Study 1 (Pacilli et al., 2016; $\omega = .93$).

3. *Natives' Multicultural Ideology.* Natives' multicultural ideology was assessed using a shortened version of the Italian adaptation of the Multicultural Ideology Scale–Revised (MCI-r; Parisse et al., 2025). Participants indicated their level of agreement on 8 items representing the dimensions of Cultural Maintenance, Equity/Inclusion, Social Interaction, and Conflictual Relations, which were identified as relevant in the Italian adaptation of the original scale (see Study 3a). An example item is: “It would be nice if all ethnic groups in Italy maintained their original culture.” Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. To test the psychometric adequacy of the shortened scale, which considers a single overall dimension of multicultural ideology, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) on RStudio (R Core, 2024). The results indicated good fit according to the thresholds proposed by Hu & Bentler (1999) and Kline (2016)¹², supporting a unidimensional measure of multicultural ideology in the shortened scale: $\chi^2(16) = 14.050$, $p = .595$; CFI = 1.000; TLI = 1.006; RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI [0.00, 0.05]; SRMR = 0.02. For comparison, a four-factor solution considering each dimension separately also showed good fit: $\chi^2(14) = 11.811$, $p = .622$; CFI = 1.000; TLI = 1.008; RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI [0.00, 0.05]; SRMR = 0.02. No significant difference emerged between the two models: $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 2.34$, $p = .326$. The results support the adequacy of using the unidimensional measure of multicultural ideology, which also showed good reliability ($\omega = 0.85$).

¹² TLI > 0.90, CFI > 0.95, RMSEA $\leq$ 0.06, and SRMR $\leq$ 0.08.

4. *Natives' Acculturation Preferences for Assimilating Asian Migrants.* Acculturation preferences for assimilation of Asian migrants were assessed using the assimilation subscale of the Acculturation Attitudes Scale proposed by Berry (2017) within the Mutual Intercultural Relations in Plural Societies (MIRIPS) project. An example item is: "Asian migrants should engage only in social activities involving Italians." Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. This scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\omega = 0.73$).

Analyses

All analyses were conducted using R Studio (R Core, 2024). Descriptive analyses were first performed, and the variables showed acceptable skewness and kurtosis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Subsequently, bivariate correlations were conducted to examine the associations among the variables, including age and gender (**Table 1d**).

Table 1d. *Bivariate Correlations*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. QC	3.80	0.66	-					
2. MD	2.12	0.77	-0.26***	-				
3. NMI	4.16	0.67	0.40***	-0.41***	-			
4. NPA	1.72	0.60	-0.08	0.23***	-0.43***	-		
5. Gender	-	-	-0.18**	0.21***	-0.25***	0.12*	-	
6. Age	24.76	2.22	-0.06	0.00	-0.09	0.05	-0.07	-

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. QC = *Quality of contact with the African migrants*, MD = *Moral distance towards African migrants*, NMI = *Natives' Multicultural Ideology*, NPA = *Natives' Acculturation Preferences for Assimilating Asian Migrants*.

Finally, we conducted a path analysis using the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) to test the proposed hypotheses and examine the structural relationships between the variables of interest. Gender was included as a covariate, as it showed significant associations with the main variables of interest.

The path analysis model was estimated using Maximum Likelihood (ML), with Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) applied to handle missing data (i.e., 1). Model fit indices were not reported because a saturated model with observed variables was estimated¹³.

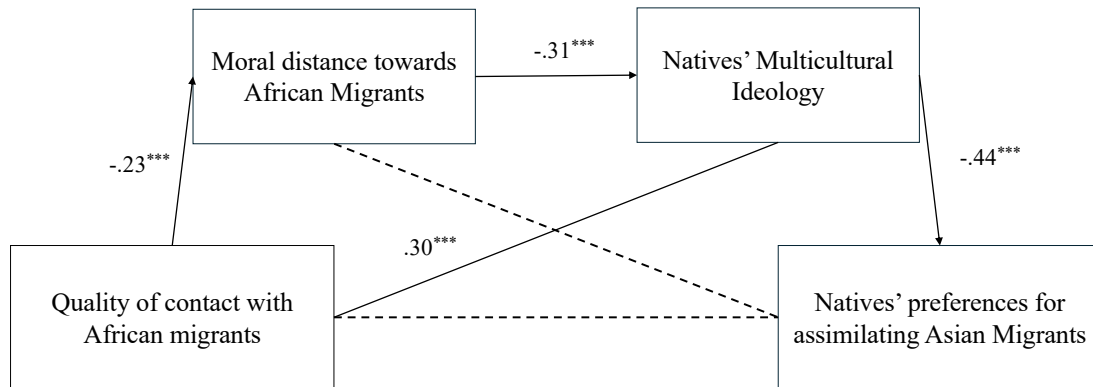
Results

The structural relationships between the variables (**Figure 2d**) indicate a negative association between positive contact with African migrants and natives' perceived moral distance towards them ($\beta = -0.23, p < 0.001$). Positive contact is also positively associated with natives' multicultural ideology ($\beta = 0.30, p < 0.001$). However, the association with natives' preferences for the assimilation of Asian migrants' culture was not significant ($\beta = 0.12, p = 0.052$).

Significant associations were found between perceived moral distance towards African migrants and natives' multicultural ideology ($\beta = -0.31, p < 0.001$), but not with assimilation preferences for Asian migrants ($\beta = 0.07, p = 0.215$). Finally, a negative association emerged between natives' multicultural ideology and assimilation preferences for Asian migrants ($\beta = -0.44, p < 0.001$).

Figure 2d. *Structural Relations*

¹³ To disentangle the adequacy of our proposed model in explaining the data compared to an alternative model, one in which multicultural ideology is treated as the exogenous variable, quality of contact toward the primary outgroup as the primary mediator, and moral distance toward the same outgroup as the secondary mediator, all predicting natives' preferences for the assimilation of the secondary outgroup, we compared the two models using the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC; Schwarz, 1978). Given that one of the models was saturated, the BIC was the only suitable fit index for comparison. The results indicated a better fit for our proposed model (BIC = 1585.8) relative to the alternative model (BIC = 1590.3).



Note: *** $p < 0.001$. The dashed line represents the absence of a significant association between the variables.

We then estimated the indirect effects of the hypothesised structural relationships using the Monte Carlo Confidence Interval method for Indirect Effects with 50,000 repetitions (Preacher & Selig, 2012). Results revealed a significant serial indirect effect of positive contact with African migrants on natives' assimilation preferences for Asian migrants through perceived moral distance towards African migrants and natives' multicultural ideology. A significant, simple indirect effect of positive contact with African migrants on assimilation preferences via multicultural ideology also emerged. No significant simple indirect effect was found through perceived moral distance as well as the total effect.

The model explained 20.2% of the variance in the dependent variable. The indirect effects are summarised in **Table 2d**.

Table 2d. Monte Carlo 95% C.Is. Indirect effects

Indirect Effects	95% CI		
	β	Lower	Upper
QC → MD → NMI → NPA	-0.03	-0.05	-0.01
QC → NMI → NPA	-0.13	-0.19	-0.08
QC → MD → NPA	-0.02	-0.05	0.01

Total Effect	-0.06	-0.18	0.06
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Note: QC = Quality of contact with the African migrants, MD=Moral distance towards African migrants, NMI = Natives' Multicultural Ideology, NPA= Natives' Acculturation Preferences for Assimilating Asian Migrants.

Discussions

The present study aimed to test the applicability of the STE paradigm to native's acculturation processes, specifically regarding their acculturation preferences, by introducing a secondary mediator distinct from those used in previous studies. The study had a dual objective: to reduce the risk of bias associated with the use of similar attitudinal measures and to deepen the understanding of the role of multicultural ideology in shaping these processes.

In the STE literature, the problem of common method variance is well documented, referring to the use of measures that capture similar attitudes while only changing the target group (see Vezzali et al., 2021). Previous studies attempted to mitigate this limitation by employing similar but opposite and independent attitudinal measures. However, including a conceptually distinct variable adds value, as it allows for stronger empirical evidence supporting the hypothesised mechanisms, ensuring that observed associations are not merely the result of methodological overlap.

In this context, multicultural ideology (Stogianni et al., 2023) is particularly suitable: it is conceptually related to but distinct from deprovincialization (Boin et al., 2020), a construct already recognised in the literature as a promoter of STE (Vezzali et al., 2021). While deprovincialization pertains to a general openness towards otherness (Boin et al., 2020), multicultural ideology provides a more contemporary and contextually relevant framework for understanding acceptance and support for cultural diversity in modern Western contexts (Stogianni et al., 2023), such as Italy. It effectively captures the complexity of multicultural settings and reflects active support for cultural diversity and equal rights between majority and minority groups (Stogianni et al., 2023).

Moreover, although the literature on predictors of multicultural support theoretically recognises the importance of perceived morality of the “other” (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2002; Verkuyten, 2007a), robust empirical evidence is still lacking. By positioning multicultural ideology as a secondary mediator and perceived moral distance as a primary mediator, the present study sheds light on how morality is related to this ideology, shaping natives’ acculturation preferences within the STE paradigm.

Results from this cross-sectional study confirmed the effectiveness of the STE paradigm on natives’ acculturation preferences through the mediating role of multicultural ideology and perceived moral distance. These findings highlight the potential of multicultural ideology as a secondary mediator in the generalisation of positive acculturation attitudes towards different migrant groups. In addition, the results revealed a significant association between the perceived moral distance towards the primary cultural group and multicultural ideology within the generalisation paradigm. This supports the idea that perceived morality, conceptualised as moral distance, plays a key role in shaping inclusive attitudes (following the broader assumptions by Kunts, 2025; Brambilla et al., 2013b): supporting cultural diversity entails perceiving the practices and values of other groups as compatible with one’s own moral system. When practices are seen as morally distant, they may act as barriers to the development of openness and respect, even towards groups with whom one has never had direct contact.

Nevertheless, some limitations should be considered. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal conclusions about the relationships among the variables. Specifically, although we examined alternative models, we cannot rule out other possible directions of causality, including bidirectional associations in which multicultural ideology functions as the exogenous variable. Future studies should further explore the directionality of these relationships.

Second, although the study tested the presence of STE in natives' acculturation processes, it relied solely on attitudinal measures concerning acculturation preferences, without exploring how these attitudes translate into actual behaviours enacted by the native population towards migrants.

In conclusion, the study highlights the effectiveness of the STE paradigm in fostering more inclusive and positive acculturation preferences among natives, thanks to the role of multicultural ideology and moral distance perception among natives. Building on these findings, the next chapter extends this framework to the behavioural domain, examining whether the same psychological mechanisms that shape acculturation preferences can also shape concrete pro-integration behaviours among natives.

Chapter 8

Secondary Transfer Effect and Natives' Acculturation Behaviours: The Role of Natives' Perceived Moral Distance and Multicultural Ideology.

General Introduction

The absence of behavioural measures within the acculturation literature has been highlighted in the most recent review (Zagefka et al., 2023), which mapped the main research avenues in the field and pointed out those still underexplored. In particular, this review emphasised the lack of studies that directly examine the behavioural outcomes among natives that may emerge from their acculturation orientations (Zagefka et al., 2023). Indeed, research has mostly focused on the attitudinal level (Zagefka et al., 2023), leaving unexplored the extent to which majority members' acculturation preferences may actively contribute, through concrete actions, to shaping the acculturation adaptation of both cultural groups.

The literature has consistently underlined that endorsing integration and multiculturalism (Berry, 1975, 1980) does not necessarily translate into actual supportive behaviours. Indeed, attitudes may remain at the level of abstract endorsement without being accompanied by concrete behavioural engagement (e.g., Dixon et al., 2010; Saguy et al., 2016). This paradox is especially relevant within Intergroup Contact literature and consequently in the STE paradigm (see Vezzali et al. 2021; Hässler et al. 2021; Ünver et al., 2022; Boin et al. 2021), with relatively few studies investigating behavioural measures in this area.

The broader question of how intergroup contact relates to collective action has always been a matter of debate. As intergroup contact is typically seen as promoting social harmony (Hässler et al., 2020) and this harmonising function may reduce the likelihood of active social

change (Hässler et al., 2021), the association between intergroup contact and collective action in favour of minority groups remain partially explored, especially concrete behaviours. To address this contradiction, the Integrated Contact Collective Action Model (ICCAM; Hässler et al., 2021) was developed as a refinement of classical models of collective action (e.g., SIMCA, Van Zomeren et al., 2018). The ICCAM aimed to identify variables capable of explaining when and under what conditions intergroup contact can foster, rather than hinder, social change in favour of minority groups. Additionally, recent work by Cocco and colleagues (2024) has further contributed to this line of investigation. Specifically, these reviews have underscored the key mediating role of outgroup morality perceptions (Cocco et al., 2024) and ideological variables (Hässler et al., 2021) in shaping collative actions.

Concerning the first mediator, the role of moral distance has already been tested in relation to collective action intentions (Vezzali et al., 2023). The assumptions were that when an outgroup is perceived as morally similar to the ingroup, majority members are more likely to engage in collective actions on behalf of that group (Vezzali et al., 2023). Although these studies address the role of intergroup contact in shaping the willingness to engage in specific action within the STE paradigm, they did not address specific actions related to acculturation practices. However, we believed that in a similar manner, moral distance can function as a mediator on the STE to natives' acculturation behaviours.

With regard to the second mediator, the existing literature has largely overlooked the role of multicultural ideology in shaping collective action behaviours within the intergroup contact framework. Most studies have focused instead on other ideological variables. For instance, Meleady and Vermue (2019) highlighted the mediating role of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Sidanius et al., 2017) in explaining advantaged groups' willingness to engage in collective action in favour of disadvantaged groups.

However, a few studies have addressed the contribution of variables more directly related to multicultural ideology. For instance, research by Ray Yol (2023) and by Urbiola and colleagues (2022) has provided evidence that supports multiculturalism has a significant role in shaping collective action intentions towards migrants. Specifically, the researchers highlighted that supporting a multicultural society can promote natives' intentions to take action in favour of migrants' integration. These findings support our assumption that multicultural ideology can be relevant in shaping natives' actual acculturation behaviours, especially when examined within the STE paradigm.

This link becomes particularly compelling when considered in combination with the perception of moral similarity. Moral similarities reduced the perception of threat that is posed by migrant outgroups (Kunts, 2025), which can create the psychological conditions that motivate members of the majority (i.e., natives) to support these groups (e.g., Celikkol et al., 2021; Shepherd et al., 2018). In such cases, natives may be more inclined to engage in concrete behaviours that foster the integration of migrant communities, as they do not perceive migrants' moral values as threatening. This assumption aligns with the broader concept of moral inclusion, which supports people's engagement in actions that promote the moral treatment of those included within one's moral circle (Crimston et al., 2016). Following this reasoning, a reduction in moral distance should represent a significant antecedent in shaping natives' concrete behaviours in favour of migrants' integration.

Based on this evidence, the present study aims to address the adaptation of the STE to natives' acculturation behaviours, investigating the role of moral distance and multicultural ideology in shaping these processes.

8.1 Study 4¹⁴

Building on this rationale, and in light of evidence highlighting the key role of moral distance and multicultural ideology in shaping natives' acculturation processes (e.g., Sam & Berry, 2006; Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020), as well as their function as mediators linking intergroup contact to collective action intentions (Cocco et al., 2024; Urbiola et al. 2022), we hypothesise that these variables may also play a crucial role in shaping natives' concrete behaviours towards secondary migrant outgroups.

Specifically, we hypothesised that:

Positive contact with African migrants will be associated with natives' acculturation behaviours towards refugees through (a) the indirect effect of natives' perceived moral distance towards African migrants and (b) multicultural ideology¹⁵.

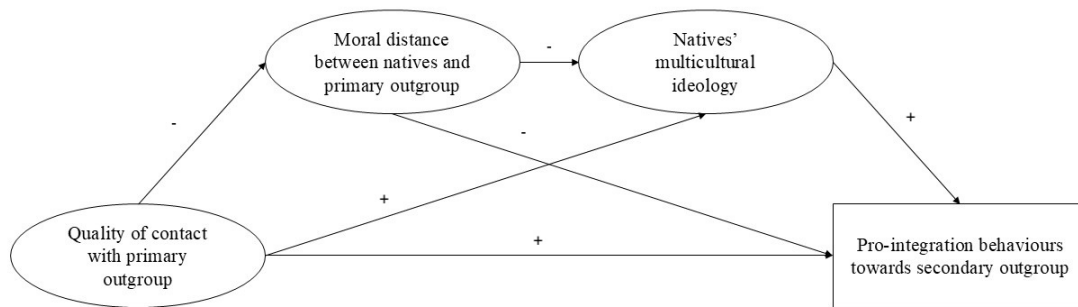
The conceptual model is presented in **Figure 1e**.

This study was originally designed as an experimental study, with the aim of manipulating the quality of intergroup contact through the imagined contact paradigm (Stathi & Crisp, 2008). However, as in the case of Studies 1 and 3, the manipulation proved ineffective (see **Appendix 3A**). Consequently, the analyses were conducted using a cross-sectional design employing the control measure related to quality of contact with the primary outgroup as the exogenous variable.

¹⁴ Parisse, C., Livi, S., Vezzali, L., Cocco, V. M., Kasic, A., & Pagliaro, S. (2025). Secondary Transfer Effect and Natives' Acculturation Behaviours: The Role of Natives' Perceived Moral Distance and Multicultural Ideology. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 35(1), e70034.

¹⁵ In the present study, we selected two distinct migrant groups following Berry's (1990) classification of migration types, which is based on three dimensions: voluntary, involuntary, and sedentary migration. From these dimensions, Berry identifies several categories of migrants, including immigrants (voluntary migration with permanent settlement), refugees and asylum seekers (involuntary migration with temporary settlement), sojourners (voluntary migration with temporary settlement), indigenous peoples (involuntary migration with permanent settlement), and ethnocultural groups (voluntary migration with permanent settlement). Our decision to differentiate between primary (i.e. migrant category) and secondary (i.e. refugees) outgroups also drew on evidence from the literature highlighting distinct patterns of attitudes toward these groups i.e., migrants vs refugees (Dixon et al., 2018).

Figure 1e. Conceptual Model



Note. 0=Petition not signed; 1= Petition signed

Methods

The sample was recruited using a snowball procedure, with the collaboration of students from a university in Northern Italy. Prior to participation, all respondents signed an informed consent form, voluntarily agreeing to take part in the study and to the processing of their data, in accordance with the ethical principles of psychological research.

The questionnaire was administered on the Qualtrics platform. The initial sample consisted of 292 individuals, but following the inclusion criteria from the previous studies, 12 participants were excluded: 2 because they were born abroad, and 10 because at least one parent was born abroad. The final sample, therefore, included 280 participants, all of whom were born in Italy to parents also born in Italy and holding Italian nationality. One participant did not declare their nationality but was included based on their own and their parents' place of birth.

The majority of participants identified as female (72.3%), while 27.7% identified as male. The mean age of the sample was 33.11 years ($SD = 16.3$). To determine the required sample size, we conducted a power analysis analogous to the one performed for Study 1.

Measures

Following the socio-demographic questions, participants responded to items concerning the following measures:

Quality of contact with African migrants. The quality of contact with African migrants was assessed with the same scale used in previous studies (Capozza et al., 2013; $\omega = 0.79$).

Perceived moral distance towards African migrants. Perceived moral distance was assessed with the same scale used in previous studies (Pacilli et al., 2016; $\omega = 0.89$).

3. *Natives' Multicultural Ideology.* Natives' multicultural ideology was assessed with the same scale used in previous studies (Pariisse et al., 2025; $\omega = 0.88$).

4. *Natives' Pro-refugee behaviours.* To assess concrete supportive integration behaviours towards refugees, participants were asked whether they wanted to sign (1) or not (0) a petition promoted by Amnesty International in support of refugee integration in Italy. The petition was available at the following link: <https://www.amnesty.it/appelli/noi-stiamo-con-i-rifugiati/>

Analyses

All analyses were conducted using R Studio (R Core, 2024). Descriptive analyses were first performed, and the variables showed acceptable skewness and kurtosis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Subsequently, bivariate correlations were conducted to examine the associations among the variables, including age and gender (**Table 1e**).

Table 1e. *Bivariate correlations*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. QC	3.91	0.78	-						
2. MD	2.29	0.88	-0.37***	-					
3. NMI	3.87	0.81	0.55***	-0.47***	-				
4. NPB	-	-	-0.24***	0.20***	-0.38***	-			
5. Age	32.3	15.4	-0.11	0.09	-0.14**	0.01	0.05	-	
6. Gender	-	-	-0.11	0.02	-0.12**	-0.06	0.10	0.06	-

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. QC = *Quality of contact with the African migrants*, MD = *Moral distance towards African migrants*, NMI = *Natives' Multicultural Ideology*, NPB = *natives' pro-integration behaviours*. NPB: 183 participants signed the petition and 107 didn't. Gender: 210 females and 80 males.

To investigate the associations between the variables, a Logistic Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) analysis was conducted, motivated by the categorical nature of the dependent variable. This approach allowed for testing the measurement model and examining the

structural relationships among the variables, including age and gender as covariates, based on the observed correlations.

The SEM analysis was carried out using a Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) estimator for the categorical variable. The latent variables considered were the quality of contact with African migrants, the perceived moral distance towards them, and the multicultural ideology of the native participants. Conversely, natives' pro-integration behaviours towards refugees and the covariates were treated as observed variables.

Model fit was evaluated using the following indices: TLI values above 0.90, CFI values above 0.95, RMSEA values ≤ 0.06 , and SRMR values ≤ 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016).

Results

The tested model showed good fit indices ($\chi^2 (142) = 126.928, p < 0.001$; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.00; RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI [0.0, 0.19]; SRMR = 0.05). Subsequently, analysing the structural relationships (see **Figure 2e**) revealed that the quality of contact with African migrants was negatively associated with the perceived moral distance of natives towards these migrants ($\beta = -0.45, p < 0.001$) and positively associated with natives' multicultural ideology ($\beta = 0.49, p < 0.001$). No significant associations were found between the quality of contact and natives' pro-integration behaviours towards refugees ($\beta = 0.03, p = 0.769$).

Furthermore, the perceived moral distance of natives towards African migrants was negatively associated with natives' multicultural ideology ($\beta = -0.33, p < 0.001$), with no significant links to natives' pro-integration behaviours towards refugees ($\beta = 0.05, p = 0.491$). Multicultural ideology, in contrast, was positively associated with natives' pro-integration behaviours towards refugees ($b = 0.38, p < 0.001$). Converting this coefficient b from the logistic structural equation model into an odds ratio indicates that for each one-unit increase in

multicultural ideology, the probability of participants signing the petition increases by approximately 46%.

Indirect effects were also analysed using the Monte Carlo confidence interval with 50,000 repetitions (Preacher & Selig, 2012). The results revealed a significant total effect. Consistent with the main hypotheses, a significant serial indirect effect of perceived moral distance and multicultural ideology on natives' pro-integration behaviours towards refugees was observed. Additionally, a significant simple indirect effect of multicultural ideology on natives' pro-integration behaviours towards refugees was found, whereas no significant simple indirect effect of perceived moral distance on the same behaviours was detected.

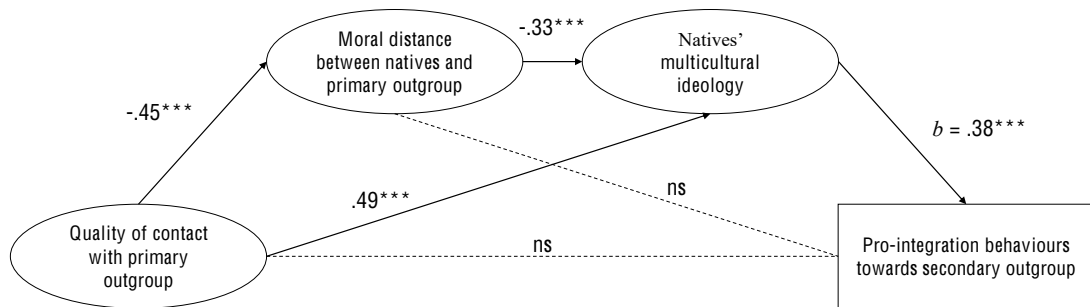
The model explained 27.9% of the variance in the dependent variable, and the indirect effects are summarised in **Table 2e**.

Table 18. *Monte Carlo 95% C.Is. Indirect effects*

Indirect Effects	95% CI		
	β	<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
QC → MD → NMI → NPB	0.08	0.04	0.12
QC → NMI → NPB	0.26	0.15	0.38
QC → MD → NPB	-0.02	-0.10	0.05
Total Effect	0.35	0.25	0.45

QC = Quality of contact with the African migrants, MD=Moral distance towards African migrants, NMI = Natives' Multicultural Ideology, NPB= natives' pro-integration behaviours.

Figure 2e. Structural Relations



Note $^{***} p < .001$, $^{**} p < .01$, $^{*} p < .05$.

Discussions

The present study aimed to examine STE processes in relation to natives' acculturation behaviours, employing a behavioural measure and considering moral distance and multicultural ideology as mediators in this process. The goal was to address a gap in the acculturation literature concerning the lack of analyses of behavioural measures of acculturation enacted by natives towards migrants (Zagefka et al., 2023), while also contributing to the understanding of behavioural processes emerging from STE mechanisms (Vezzali et al., 2021; Ünver et al., 2022).

To this end, the study investigated the role of two potential mediators, moral distance and multicultural ideology, given that Cocco and colleagues (2024) as well as Hässler and colleagues (2021) highlighted the role of morality and ideologies (see also Urbiola et al., 2022) in supporting processes linking intergroup contact to collective actions towards disadvantaged groups.

The results showed that positive contact of natives with African migrants (primary group) was associated with natives' pro-integration behaviours towards refugees (secondary group), not directly, but through an indirect effect mediated by the perceived moral distance

towards the primary group and natives' multicultural ideology. These findings align with the STE literature, which emphasises the indirect role of contact in generalisation processes.

Moreover, the results support previous research highlighting morality as a mediator in the STE model (Vezzali et al., 2021) and in collective action intentions (Cocco et al., 2024), particularly with respect to moral distance (Vezzali et al., 2023). Findings regarding multicultural ideology are also consistent with literature emphasising its positive association on multicultural attitudes, such as acceptance of diversity, and its mediating role in the STE model (Henschel & Derksen, 2023; Henschel & Köttling, 2023), as well as its potential to shape actions taken by advantaged groups, e.g., natives, in support of disadvantaged groups, e.g., migrants (Urbiola et al., 2022).

Additionally, the results also underscore the role of perceived moral distance within the STE paradigm in shaping natives' multicultural ideology: supporting cultural diversity entails perceiving the practices and values of other groups as compatible with one's own moral system, thereby fostering the endorsement of a multicultural ideology and, consequently, promoting actions aimed at facilitating integration practices towards migrant groups.

These findings extend previous knowledge by confirming the importance of these constructs and of intergroup contact not only for natives' acculturation preferences towards migrant outgroups, but also for concrete actions that emerge from these processes, actions that mobilise individuals towards social equality and promote social harmony, which are central objectives in both contact and acculturation research.

Furthermore, the successful application of the STE paradigm to these processes highlights the value of adopting a comprehensive theoretical framework related to the generalisation of contact effects to better understand acculturation processes, including natives' acculturation behaviours in multicultural societies characterised by the presence of diverse cultural groups.

However, our study has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for establishing causal relationships among the variables. Future research should adopt experimental designs to clarify the causal effects between variables. Second, we did not assess the credibility that participants attributed to the petition; nevertheless, the presence of variations in the measure, consistent with expectations, suggests good reliability. Additionally, the petition, as a form of collective action, requires minimal effort from participants (Yasseri et al., 2017), so similar outcomes might not be observed when using a more demanding behavioural measure, such as monetary donations.

In conclusion, we demonstrated the applicability of the STE paradigm to natives' acculturation behaviours as well, through the indirect effects of moral distance and multicultural ideology. Taken together with the previous studies, these findings contribute to achieving the overarching goal of the research project, integrating the STE framework into the study of natives' acculturation processes, and set the stage for the following general discussion, which summarises and interprets the main results in light of their theoretical and practical implications for promoting social harmony in multicultural societies.

General Discussion

The growing cultural diversity in Western societies, such as Italy, together with the increase in migration flows (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025; Berry, 2019), has emphasised the importance of identifying ways to foster social harmony while considering the presence of very different cultural backgrounds and statuses among migrants.

Italy has shown several limitations in achieving social harmony, mainly due to shortcomings in integration policies that have fostered discriminatory attitudes among natives (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2023). These limitations highlight the urgent need to develop practices capable of strengthening natives' integration orientations, which represent the main practice to enhance social harmony in the wider society (Sam & Berry, 2006).

Within this framework, research on intergroup contact (Allport, 1954) and acculturation (Sam & Berry, 2006) has been particularly influential. Yet, although both literatures have focused on fostering social harmony (Lefringhausen et al., 2020; Hässler et al., 2020), they fall short in accounting for the complexity of today's multicultural landscape in Western societies (Berry, 2019) such as Italy (Eurostat, 2024). In this respect, the STE (Pettigrew, 2009) appears especially useful. By demonstrating how a single positive contact with one outgroup can promote more generalised positive attitudes towards other outgroups, the STE is particularly relevant for addressing generalised acculturation orientations among natives as well.

Specifically, to foster harmonious intergroup relations and promote effective integration, it is crucial that natives demonstrate a willingness to accept, recognise, and value the presence of migrants within their social environment (Sam & Berry, 2006). Achieving genuine social harmony, however, requires that integration-oriented acculturation practices among natives transcend categorical boundaries and encourage a cooperative rather than threatening perception of cultural diversity (see Kunst, 2025).

Building on this, the present research project aimed to adapt the STE paradigm to natives' acculturation processes, focusing both on attitudinal orientations and on actual behaviours towards secondary outgroups with whom natives had no prior interaction. This adaptation advances our understanding of how acculturation processes towards a primary outgroup can be extended to the broader migrant population (secondary outgroups).

In addressing these issues, the research project considered different mediators with particular attention to the pivotal role of moral similarities, conceptualised as moral distance (Pacilli et al., 2016), in shaping generalised processes. Moral perceptions have been shown to be particularly relevant for explaining natives' acculturation orientations (see Kunts, 2025) and collective action intentions (Vezzali et al., 2023), yet existing evidence has not sufficiently addressed their role in understanding the generalisation of these processes. In addition to moral distance, two further mediators (as secondary mediators) were considered: natives' acculturation orientation towards the primary migrant outgroup and multicultural ideology.

The first mediator was included in line with the main analytical strategies typically adopted in STE research (see Vezzali et al., 2021). More specifically, prior research on STE paradigm has investigated the extent to which attitudes towards a primary outgroup generalise to attitudes towards a secondary outgroup. Since these generalised processes, explained through attitude generalisation, constitute the core definition and analytic approach of the STE, we included them here, conceptualised as acculturation attitudes, in order to preliminarily test the adaptation of the STE paradigm to natives' acculturation processes.

Once this is established, a second mediator, multicultural ideology (Stogianni et al., 2023), would be introduced. Multicultural ideology refers to a broader positive attitude towards diversity and equality (e.g., Berry & Kalin, 1995). Its inclusion helped reduce the risk of common method variance associated with attitudinal measures (see Vezzali et al., 2021) and

offered a promising direction for further research, given its established importance in intergroup contact and acculturation studies (Sam & Berry, 2006; Berry & Kalin, 1995).

Additionally, the overall investigation was guided by the aim of providing causal evidence for these processes. To this end, the project employed low-resource but effective experimental manipulations of intergroup contact, such as imagined contact (Stathi & Crisp, 2008) and media-based contact framed within a moral perspective (Mazziotta et al., 2011; Janković & Čehajić-Clancy, 2021; Rupar et al., 2022), also considering their role in shaping STE processes (Harwood et al., 2011; Rupar et al., 2022).

To sum up, the main goal of this research project was to offer solid support for the adaptation of the STE paradigm to natives' acculturation processes, both attitudinal and behavioural, identifying the key mechanisms driving these dynamics in order to provide useful tools to implement within the Italian society.

Based on these assumptions and the main objectives of this research, we conducted four studies to assess the adaptation of the STE to natives' acculturation processes and to disentangle the pivotal role of moral distance, attitudes generalisation and lastly multicultural ideology, in shaping these processes.

Results from all the studies support the adaptation of this paradigm to address generalised native acculturation processes, both attitudinal and behavioural.

Among the studies, the first provides evidence for the adaptation of the STE paradigm through the mechanisms of moral distance and the generalisation of acculturation attitudes. Specifically, natives' reports of a positive interaction with a particular migrant outgroup emerged associated with their acculturation preferences towards a different migrant outgroup. This association occurred via moral distance towards the primary outgroup and natives' acculturation orientation towards them. These findings support the main hypothesis that positive contact with one migrant group can shape natives' tendency to wish another migrant

group to assimilate into the host culture. This occurs because: fewer natives perceived a moral distance towards the primary outgroup, and the perceived threat associated with acculturation strategies that support migrants' cultural maintenance. Additionally, this relates to natives' preference for the cultural maintenance of the primary outgroup and may promote a less anxious and less threatening mindset towards migrants more broadly (Study 1).

Study 2 revealed a significant effect of mass media contact with a primary outgroup when framed within a moral framework, which substantially reduced moral distance towards that outgroup. Specifically, exposure to immoral contact increased moral distance towards the primary outgroup involved in the interaction, whereas exposure to moral contact reduced this distance. Furthermore, higher levels of moral distance were associated with weaker integration-oriented acculturation preferences towards the primary outgroup and stronger assimilation-oriented preferences towards the secondary outgroup. By contrast, lower levels of moral distance supported integration-oriented preferences towards both the primary, while discouraging assimilation-oriented preferences towards the secondary outgroup. Overall, these results suggest that mass media contact, when framed in terms of morality, can foster generalised acculturation preferences by reducing moral distance towards the primary outgroup. More broadly, this evidence highlights the pivotal role of morality in shaping natives' acculturation orientations (see also Kunts, 2025) and indicates that it should be considered a central dimension in future research.

Study 3 replicated a similar pattern to that observed in Study 1, while also introducing multicultural ideology as a second mediator in the main model. To this end, the scale for multicultural ideology was first adapted to the Italian context (Study 3a), resulting in a successful four-factor solution that confirmed its suitability for our analyses. Building on this, the findings from the main study (Study 3b) support the assumption that positive contact with a migrant outgroup can shape natives' acculturation orientations towards a secondary outgroup

through moral distance towards the primary outgroup and endorsement in multicultural ideology. These results further suggest that broader attitudes, similar to the concept of deprovincialization (Boin et al., 2020), may serve as relevant mediators in shaping generalised acculturation orientations among natives. However, the perception of the outgroup's morality emerges as a pivotal factor in relation to these broader attitudes and, consequently, in shaping natives' acculturation orientations towards a secondary outgroup.

The findings of Study 4 support the hypothesis that positive interaction with a migrant outgroup can shape natives' acculturation behaviours (i.e., integration-behaviours) towards a secondary outgroup. The results confirmed the mediating roles of moral distance and multicultural ideology, thereby extending the applicability of the STE paradigm to actual behavioural outcomes. These findings highlight the value of adapting the STE framework to natives' acculturation processes, including their active engagement in behaviours that promote social change in support of migrant groups within multicultural societies.

Lastly, although through the studies the imagined contact manipulation did not reach significance, the strong consistency of the cross-sectional findings with theoretical expectations provides valuable support for the robustness of the proposed model and highlights promising directions for future experimental replications.

Overall, the findings underscore the relevance of adapting the STE paradigm to the study of acculturation processes as a means to promote social harmony in multicultural contexts such as Italy. Across studies, moral distance consistently emerged as a significant mechanism: low perceptions of moral distance towards a primary outgroup can shape natives' orientations towards that group and, in turn, also towards secondary outgroups. Accordingly, multicultural ideology also played a crucial role in guiding both attitudinal and behavioural orientations, with moral distance emerging as a potential antecedent of this broader ideology: low perceptions of moral distance towards a primary migrant outgroup can shape natives' endorsement of cultural

diversity, which in turn can shape more positive acculturation orientations and supportive behaviours towards secondary migrant outgroups within the broader context.

Importantly, among the experimental manipulations used, only the mass-media contact framed around moral interaction produced significant effects. This finding underscores the central role of morality, not only as a mediating mechanism in these processes but also as a core dimension of intergroup interactions involving migrant groups.

Overall, these results highlight the importance of promoting positive interactions with migrants, as such encounters can foster perceptions of moral similarity and, in turn, weaken negative stereotypes towards other migrant groups. This process supports integration-oriented attitudes and behaviours towards migrants and, ultimately, contributes to building a more cooperative and harmonious society, where cultural diversity is recognised not as a source of threat, but as an opportunity for enrichment and mutual growth.

Despite these contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the role of imagined contact remained inconclusive. Although extensively supported in previous research, in our studies, it failed to produce significant effects on the key variables under investigation (see Appendix for the mini meta-analyses). The results from the mini meta-analyses indicate that the effect of the imagined contact manipulation was non-significant on all the main variables and against the hypotheses on moral distance, although the effect size was very small, suggesting that larger samples are needed to detect potential effects. These findings imply that, within our studies, fostering a positive imagined interaction with migrants may have produced a *rebound effect* (Macrae et al., 1994), increasing perceptions of moral distance rather than reducing them. However, although this effect went in the opposite direction to our hypotheses, it was statistically non-significant, supporting the conclusion that no firm inferences can be drawn without increasing statistical power.

Moreover, these non-significant results provide useful indications regarding the sample sizes required to investigate the impact of imagined contact on morality perceptions. To date, only cross-sectional studies have demonstrated a strong link between positive contact and moral distance. The absence of a significant effect in our imagined contact manipulation and the presence of a strong negative correlation between these variables highlight the need to explore alternative forms of contact manipulations to better disentangle these relationships or to understand under what conditions this paradigm provides a positive effect on moral perceptions. Additionally, given the use of broad migrant categories following cross-sectional studies reported in the literature (see Vezzali et al., 2023), future research should examine this as a potential source of bias. Specifically, participants may hold different representations of the broader category of migrants labelled as “Africans”. However, even when we addressed this concern in Study 3b by including images of the specific outgroup of African migrants, as recommended by Stathi et al. (2014), the results remained consistent with those of the other studies, strengthening the reliability of our findings regarding the ineffectiveness of the imagined contact manipulation.

Finally, the mass-media contact manipulation framed around morality, the only one that yielded significant results across studies, suggests that embedding a moral frame within intergroup contact interventions may be a promising approach to shifting morality perceptions of outgroups.

Another issue relates to sampling procedures: snowball sampling and online recruitment platforms such as Prolific, while practical, are not representative of the wider population and therefore introduce sampling bias.

Lastly, the present research addresses only one possible direction of generalisation: how natives’ acculturation preferences toward one migrant outgroup may shape their preferences toward another. Future studies could further disentangle the specific contribution of each

migrant outgroup category to these generalisation processes by reversing the order of the target groups. This would allow researchers to examine whether and how the generalisation differs depending on the particular migrant group considered, especially in light of the distinct social representations that different migrant categories hold within Italian society (Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025).

Despite these limitations, the project advances a valuable framework for understanding and fostering social harmony in multicultural societies and disentangles the role of morality in these processes. Future studies could expand this line of research by investigating whether these processes also apply to migrant populations themselves, for example, by examining whether moral similarity facilitates migrants' engagement in integration-oriented acculturation strategies as well as happens among natives. Additional research could also explore outcomes beyond intercultural adaptation, such as migrants' sociocultural adjustment and psychological adjustment, as well as other morality-related dimensions (e.g., moral concerns, moral beliefs) to enrich our understanding of these processes. Additionally, investigating the role of other mediators from intergroup contact and acculturation literature can be effective to disentangle the processes leading to natives' acculturation generalised processes.

Lastly, from a practical standpoint, the findings provide important insights for supporting integration processes in Italy. A particularly meaningful implication is the promotion of moral framing in media representations of migrants, which may help reduce discrimination, encourage integration, and ultimately contribute to building social harmony within multicultural societies. Additionally, implementing interventions that foster intergroup interactions, highlighting moral similarities with migrant outgroups, can enhance natives' acculturation processes in favour of integrating them.

In conclusion, this research supports the adaptation of the STE paradigm to natives' acculturation processes, both attitudinal and behavioural, highlighting the specific and central

role of morality in extending these effects. More broadly, the project offers a promising paradigm for understanding and promoting social harmony in multicultural contexts such as Italy.

APPENDIX

1A. Study 1

The present study implemented an imagined contact manipulation (Stathi & Crisp, 2008) to investigate the applicability of the STE paradigm to generalised natives' acculturation preferences, with a focus on the role of moral distance as a mediator in these processes.

Imagined contact is a technique that involves mentally simulating a positive encounter with members of the outgroup. This form of indirect contact, which does not require face-to-face interaction, has been shown to be particularly effective in reducing intergroup anxiety and promoting positive attitudes and willingness for future interactions (Crisp & Turner, 2009). Its theoretical roots trace back to Allport (1954), who already emphasised the role of imagination as a first step toward more harmonious intergroup relations. Subsequent research has shown that imagined contact can affect not only attitudes and emotions but also intentions and concrete behaviours (Miles & Crisp, 2014), fostering perceptions of stereotypically positive traits in outgroups (Stathi & Crisp, 2008) and even influencing migrants' acculturation preferences (Bagci et al., 2019). Additionally, it emerged as effective in promoting positive attitudes toward migrants also within the STE paradigm (e.g. Harwood et al., 2011)

However, there is a lack of studies applying imagined contact to natives' acculturation preferences, especially within the STE framework. Based on prior findings of the effect of this manipulation on attitudinal variables among majority groups (e.g. Harwood et al., 2011), we hypothesise that this manipulation could also impact natives' acculturation preferences, offering a novel perspective complementary to investigations focused on minority groups (Bagci et al., 2019). Moreover, as positive contact has been shown to promote the attribution of favourable moral traits to outgroups (Vezzali et al., 2020; Vezzali et al., 2023), it is plausible that an imagined contact manipulation (Stathi & Crisp, 2008), when framed positively, could

foster perceptions of moral similarity between groups (reducing perceived moral distance) and consequently influence natives' acculturation preferences toward different migrant outgroups within the STE framework.

The main hypotheses assumed that:

Positive imagined contact with a primary migrant outgroup (Africans) is expected to reduce natives' preferences for the cultural adaptation of a secondary migrant outgroup (Asians) within private domains, through a mediated process involving (a) natives' perceived moral distance toward the primary outgroup and (b) natives' acculturation preferences for cultural maintenance of that outgroup within the same domains, compared to positive imagined contact with a fellow national.

Participants

The sample matches the size and sociodemographic characteristics of those reported in the main manuscript. An a priori power analysis was conducted to estimate the sample size needed to detect the effects of the manipulation on the variables of interest. The analysis performed using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), indicated that a sample of 260 participants would be required to detect small-to-medium effects ($F = 0.18$) of the manipulation on the variables considered (for a meta-analysis see Miles & Crisp, 2014).

Method

The manipulation, divided in two conditions, asked participants in the experimental condition to imagine for five minutes talking with a migrant person (i.e., an African migrant, the primary outgroup) sitting next to them on the bus. They were asked to imagine spending thirty minutes talking with this person and, during the conversation, discovering positive and interesting things about them, which they would then list. In the control condition, participants were asked to imagine a similar situation but with a fellow national¹⁶. The manipulation

¹⁶ In this study, there was no formal manipulation check for the manipulation used.

paradigm, including the choice to include interaction with a fellow national as a control condition, followed the design proposed by Turner et al. (2013).

Subsequently, participants were asked to evaluate the perceived moral distance between Italians and migrants of African origin (primary outgroup) using the scale by Pacilli et al. (2016), along with their preferences for the cultural maintenance of these migrants in private domains (Navas et al., 2005) and for the adaptation of Asian migrants' culture (secondary outgroup) within the same domains (Navas et al., 2005). The study also included measurements of these variables prior to the manipulation (T_0), including quality of contact with the primary outgroup, considering the possibility that pre-existing perceptions could play a role in understanding the effectiveness of the manipulation (Tassinari et al., 2024; Vezzali et al., 2021; Dermody et al., 2013).

Measures

Following the socio-demographic questions, participants were presented with the following measures¹⁷ before and after the manipulation:

Quality of contact with African migrants (T_0) by Capozza et al. (2013). The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.90$).

Perceived moral distance from African migrants (T_0 and T_1) by Pacilli et al. (2016). The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega_{T_0} = 0.93$ and $\omega_{T_1} = 0.94$).

Maintenance of African migrants' culture in private domains (T_0 and T_1) by Navas et al. (2005). The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega_{T_0} = 0.82$ and $\omega_{T_1} = 0.88$).

Adoption of Italian culture by Asian migrants in private domains. (T_0 and T_1) by Navas et al. (2005). The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega_{T_0} = 0.55$ and $\omega_{T_1} = 0.87$).

Analyses

¹⁷ All measures have already been described in the main manuscript, so we will only report the references and their reliability coefficients.

To assess the effects of the manipulation, we conducted repeated-measures analyses of variance using the *rstatix* package (Kassambara, 2023) in R Studio (R Core Team, 2024). We examined the impact of the manipulation on all variables of interest, namely, moral distance, natives' preference for African migrants' cultural maintenance in private domains, and natives' preference for Asian migrants' adoption of Italian culture in the same domains, in line with our main hypothesis.

More specifically, we tested the effect of the manipulation on these variables both between and within subjects, while including the quality of contact with African migrants as a covariate in the model.

Results

The results indicate that the effect of the manipulation on natives' perceived moral distance toward the primary outgroup (African migrants) was not significant at the between-subjects level, $F(1, 317) = 0.05, p = .822$, supporting the absence of a significant effect of the manipulation. However, at the within-subjects level, a significant interaction between the manipulation and the (within) pre-post condition emerged $F(1, 318) = 4.80, p = .03$. A subsequent post hoc analysis with Tukey correction revealed a mean difference between pre-post measure of moral distance only in the experimental condition of $-0.17 (p < .001)$. This finding suggests a counter-hypothetical effect of the manipulation, indicating that moral distance increased following the imagined contact condition.

No comparable effects emerged for the other variables considered. Specifically, for natives' preferences regarding the cultural maintenance of the primary outgroup (African migrants) in private domains, neither the between-subjects effect, $F(1, 317) = 0.26, p = .61$, nor the within-subjects interaction, $F(1, 317) = 0.12, p = .73$, was significant. Similarly, for natives' preferences concerning the cultural adaptation of the secondary outgroup (Asian migrants) in

private domains, neither the between-subjects effect, $F(1, 317) = 2.53, p = .11$, nor the within-subjects interaction, $F(1, 317) = 0.13, p = .72$, reached significance.

Discussion

These results suggest that the imagined contact manipulation had relatively weak effects on the variables of interest overall. However, it did change natives' perceptions of African migrants' moral distance across pre- and post-imagined contact, though in a counter-hypothetical direction, producing an outcome that may hinder rather than promote positive intergroup relations.

These findings can be interpreted in several ways. It is possible that asking participants to imagine a positive interaction with a migrant outgroup generates a sort of *rebound effect*, whereby they evaluate the outgroup less positively (Macrae et al., 1994). Macrae et al. (1994) demonstrated that the tendency to suppress stereotypes could lead to a subsequent reinforcement of those same stereotypes, even stronger than if they had not been suppressed. In their studies, participants were initially asked to complete a writing task about "skinheads," instructed not to include stereotypes. Later, they performed various tasks, including writing, spatial positioning, and a lexical task, without any further instructions. Results showed that those who had suppressed stereotypes in the initial writing task subsequently produced more stereotypical descriptions, displayed greater social distancing in behaviour, and had faster accessibility to stereotype-related words, indicating a *rebound effect* of stereotype suppression.

Although imagined contact does not directly instruct participants to suppress their stereotypes, it indirectly requires them to engage in a pleasant and interesting interaction with outgroup members. This may compel participants to exert effort in performing the task and could include a component of social desirability toward the experimenter. Similarly, Dermody et al. (2013) found inconsistent effects of this manipulation on both implicit and explicit attitudes toward homosexuals, highlighting the limitations of the manipulation. They also

observed that negative attitudes toward homosexuals decreased more in the control condition than in the experimental condition.

However, we cannot rule out the possibility of clustering effects between participants across the two experimental conditions. In particular, the absence of a significant between-subjects main effect of the manipulation suggests that the manipulation itself was not effective and therefore does not permit us to assume the presence of a genuine control condition. Additionally, the absence of an adequate manipulation check prevents us from verifying whether the manipulation effectively elicited positive content toward the primed outgroup, making it difficult to determine whether the issue lies in the manipulation itself or in the influence of moral perceptions.

However, since the variables of interest were also measured at T_0 , we decided to conduct a cross-sectional analysis on the T_0 data to examine whether the associations observed at this time point, prior to the manipulation, were consistent with our hypotheses. This approach allows us to better understand whether any issues may lie in the experimental procedure or in the research hypotheses themselves.

2A. Study 3b

The present study implemented an imagined contact manipulation (Stathi et al., 2014) to adapt the STE paradigm to generalised natives' acculturation preferences, with a focus on the role of moral distance and multicultural ideology as mediators in these processes.

Building on the previous observation that no studies have yet examined the effect of positive imagined contact on natives' acculturation preferences within the STE paradigm via moral distance, the present study also explored the role of this manipulation in relation to multicultural ideology.

Positive contact has consistently been linked to the attribution of favourable moral traits to outgroup members (Vezzali et al., 2020; Vezzali et al., 2023), suggesting that interventions based on imagined contact manipulation may effectively reduce perceived moral distance between natives and outgroups. This reduction in moral distance, in turn, is likely to shape natives' acculturation preferences toward different migrant groups within the framework of the STE. Moreover, prior research has documented that positive contact can shape STE processes through deprovincialization (Henschel & Derksen, 2023; Henschel & Köttling, 2023), a construct conceptually related to multicultural ideology, which reflects a broader attitudinal openness toward cultural diversity. Based on this conceptual link, multicultural ideology can be expected to act as a potential mediator in the generalisation of natives' acculturation preferences, and it can be affected by imagined positive contact manipulation.

Based on these assumptions, we hypothesised that:

Positive imagined contact with a primary migrant outgroup (Africans) is expected to reduce natives' preferences for the cultural assimilation of a secondary migrant outgroup (Asians), through a mediated process involving (a) natives' perceived moral distance toward the primary outgroup and (b) natives' multicultural ideology.

Participants

Only participants who responded correctly to the manipulation check ($N = 242$) were included in the main analyses. The final sample consisted of 242 participants, with an average age of 24.73 (2.25), of whom 55.37% female and 44.63% male. The required sample size was the same as the one determined in Study 1A.

Method

The manipulation was adapted from the experimental protocol by Stathi et al. (2014), which incorporates the use of images to enhance the effectiveness of the imagination task. It included two conditions: an experimental condition and a control condition, both matched for gender with respect to the imagined target. In the experimental condition, participants were asked to imagine, for five minutes, sitting on a bus next to a migrant of African origin (our primary outgroup). They were instructed to have a conversation with this person lasting approximately thirty minutes, during which positive and interesting aspects of the migrant would emerge and were then asked to list these aspects. In the control condition, the procedure was identical, but the imagined target was a fellow national, thus belonging to the ingroup (see Turner et al., 2013). After the manipulation, participants completed the manipulation check regarding the ethnicity of the imagined interlocutor.

Measures

Following the socio-demographic questions, the manipulation and the manipulation check participants were presented with the following measures¹⁸:

Quality of contact with African migrants by Capozza et al. (2013). Quality of contact with the primary outgroup was employed to evaluate the effectiveness of the manipulation in enhancing positive contact with this migrant outgroup. The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.82$).

¹⁸ All measures have already been described in the main manuscript, so we will only report the references and their reliability coefficients.

Perceived moral distance from African migrants by Pacilli et al. (2016). The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.93$).

Natives' Multicultural Ideology by an adaptation of Parisse et al. (2025). The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.85$).

Natives' Acculturation Preferences for Assimilating Asian Migrants by Berry (2017). The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.73$).

Analyses

To assess the effects of the manipulation, we conducted a one-way ANOVA using R Studio (R Core Team, 2024). We examined the impact of the manipulation on all variables of interest, namely, quality of contact, natives' perceived moral distance, natives' multicultural ideology, and natives' preference for assimilating Asian migrants into Italian culture, in line with our main hypothesis.

Results

The results showed that the imagined contact manipulation did not produce a significant effect on the perceived quality of contact with the primary outgroup, $F(1, 240) = 2.72, p = .10$, the measure employed for detecting the effectiveness of the manipulation. However, the means suggested a slight increase in perceived contact quality in the experimental condition ($M = 3.88$) compared to the control condition ($M = 3.74$), albeit without reaching statistical significance. Similarly, no significant effects of the manipulation emerged on the study's main endogenous variables: moral distance, $F(1, 240) = 0.31, p = .58$; multicultural ideology, $F(1, 240) = 0.00, p = .95$; or natives' assimilation preferences toward Asian migrants, $F(1, 240) = 0.10, p = .75$.

Notably, the measure of perceived moral distance showed a counterintuitive pattern: the mean in the experimental condition ($M = 2.13$) was slightly higher than in the control condition ($M = 2.08$), suggesting a potential increase in perceived moral distance toward the migrant outgroup in the positive imagined contact condition. Although not statistically significant, this

pattern may indicate a paradoxical effect of the manipulation, consistent with the previous study (Study 1A) showing that imagined contact can sometimes exacerbate pre-existing attitudes or trigger defensive processes, such as stereotypes or implicit resistance.

Discussion

In summary, these findings indicate that the imagined contact manipulation did not produce significant changes in moral perceptions toward the primary outgroup, in natives' acculturation orientations toward that outgroup, or in ideological variables associated with the endorsement of cultural diversity, similar to the patterns observed in Study 1A. These findings can be interpreted as those that emerged from Study 1A, supporting a potential *rebound effect* of the manipulation (Macrae et al., 1994) along with a very weak effect of this type of manipulation on the variables investigated (see also Dermody et al., 2013). Additionally, using an imagined interaction with a fellow national as the control condition may not constitute an entirely appropriate comparison group. Although this paradigm is well established (see Turner et al., 2013), it may have inadvertently produced a counter-hypothetical effect on the measure of moral distance, for instance, by increasing perceived distance, given that Italian fellow nationals might be viewed as immoral by some participants. This would contrast with the prevailing hypothesis on morality perceptions, which typically supports the presence of ingroup favouritism (Leach et al., 2007). Moreover, existing evidence on moral ingroup favouritism is largely dispositional, and little is known about how individuals react when they are experimentally primed to imagine contact with a fellow national. Future studies should therefore employ a more neutral control condition to clarify whether the issue lies within the control scenario itself or within the manipulation.

Nonetheless, in the present study, we retained the data within a cross-sectional design to examine whether the correlational patterns aligned with our main hypotheses, as in the previous study.

3A. Study 4

This study implemented an imagined contact manipulation using the experimental design proposed by Stathi and Crisp (2008) in order to investigate the effects of this manipulation on STE processes that drive natives' acculturation behaviours. Building on the evidence reported in Studies 1 and 3, the literature has not yet thoroughly examined the role of this manipulation in relation to STE processes that include moral distance and multicultural ideology as potential moderators.

Specifically, given that previous research has supported the influence of imagined contact on variables related to morality, constructs analogous to multicultural ideology, and intentions for collective action (see Vezzali et al., 2021; Henschel & Derksen, 2023; Henschel & Kötting, 2023; Crisp & Turner, 2009), we hypothesised that this manipulation could be an effective tool to detect effects on natives' acculturation behaviours within the STE. In other words, imagined contact may not only reduce negative stereotypes and prejudice but also enhance the willingness of natives to engage in behaviours that support integration, especially when moral perceptions and multicultural beliefs are taken into account as mediating factors.

Based on these assumptions, we hypothesised that:

Positive imagined contact with a primary migrant outgroup (Africans) is expected to increase natives' pro-integration behaviour towards a secondary migrant outgroup (refugees), through a mediated process involving (a) natives' perceived moral distance toward the primary outgroup and (b) natives' multicultural ideology.

Participants

Only participants who responded correctly to the manipulation check ($N = 249$) were included in the main analyses. The final sample consisted of 249 participants, with an average age of 32.91 (16.28), of whom 72.29% female and 27.71% male. The required sample size was the same as the one determined in Study 1.

Method

The manipulation consisted of two conditions: an experimental condition and a control condition. In the experimental condition, participants were asked to imagine, for approximately five minutes, meeting for the first time an African migrant living in Italy. They were instructed to envision the interaction as relaxed, positive, and comfortable, and to focus on discovering interesting and positive aspects about this person.

In contrast, the control condition asked participants to imagine a scene outdoors, in nature, alone, without any social interaction.

Manipulation checks were included to ensure that participants correctly followed the instructions: specifically, that those in the experimental condition imagined interacting with a migrant individual, and that those in the control condition imagined themselves alone in a natural environment. These checks allowed us to verify that the manipulation effectively distinguished between social versus non-social imagined scenarios.

Measures

Following the socio-demographic questions, the manipulation and the manipulation check, participants were presented with the following measures¹⁹:

Quality of contact with African migrants by Capozza et al. (2013). Quality of contact with the primary outgroup was employed to evaluate the effectiveness of the manipulation in enhancing positive contact with this migrant outgroup. The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.82$).

Perceived moral distance from African migrants by Pacilli et al. (2016). The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.93$).

¹⁹ All measures have already been described in the main manuscript, so we will only report the references and their reliability coefficients.

Natives' Multicultural Ideology by an adaptation of Parisse et al. (2025). The scale proved to be reliable ($\omega = 0.85$).

Natives' Pro-refugee behaviours retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.it/appelli/noi-stiamo-con-i-rifugiati/>.

To assess the effects of the manipulation, we conducted a one-way ANOVA using RStudio (R Core Team, 2024). We examined the impact of the manipulation on all variables of interest, namely, quality of contact toward African migrants, natives' perceived moral distance toward them, natives' multicultural ideology, and natives' pro-integration behaviours towards refugees, in line with our main hypothesis.

Results

We conducted a one-way ANOVA to assess the effect of the manipulation on the quality of contact with the primary outgroup. The results did not reveal a significant effect, $F(1, 247) = 0.773, p = .38$, indicating that the manipulation did not influence contact quality, which is the main variable to detect the effectiveness of the manipulation.

Subsequently, additional one-way ANOVAs were performed on the other study variables to examine whether they were affected by the manipulation. No significant effects were found for moral distance toward the primary group, $F(1, 247) = 0.11, p = .74$; for multicultural ideology, $F(1, 247) = 0.267, p = .606$; or for pro-integration behaviour toward the secondary outgroup, $F(1, 247) = 2.046, p = .154$.

Although none of these effects reached statistical significance, the mean values followed the expected direction. In the imagined contact condition, there was a slight increase in contact quality (from 3.84 to 3.93), in multicultural ideology (from 3.83 to 3.88), and in petition signing. Regarding the latter, data showed a difference between the experimental and control conditions: in the control condition, 58.7% of participants signed the petition, whereas 41.3% did not; in the experimental condition, the percentage of signatories was higher (67.5%), with 32.5%

choosing not to sign. Conversely, a small increase in moral distance (from 2.32 in the control condition to 2.38 in the experimental condition) emerged in the imagined contact condition as in previous studies.

Discussion

These results suggest that imagined contact may partially produce opposite effects on moral distance perceptions, as observed in Studies 1 and 3, although the effects did not reach statistical significance. This pattern appears consistent with the previous studies, even when including a control condition unrelated to interactions with fellow nationals. Taken together, these findings point to the potential presence of a *rebound effect* of the manipulation (Macrae et al., 1994) on moral distance perceptions, as well as to a very small effect size that may not have been detectable given the available sample size.

Mini Meta-Analysis of the Experimental and Cross-Sectional Studies

Across the three experimental studies presented in this appendix, we examined the role of imagined contact manipulations within the STE paradigm, focusing on moral distance, multicultural ideology, and acculturation-related outcomes. Although each study was grounded in strong theoretical assumptions and prior evidence highlighting the benefits of imagined contact in eliciting positive contact with an outgroup as well as several positive outcomes (Crisp & Turner, 2009; Miles & Crisp, 2014; Vezzali et al., 2020, 2023), the empirical findings painted a more complex and inconsistent picture.

Specifically, given the pivotal role of moral perceptions, conceptualised through a moral comparison framework that links acculturation research (e.g., Ordóñez-Carrasco et al., 2020) with studies on the Secondary Transfer Effect (e.g., Vezzali et al., 2023), it becomes essential to highlight and carefully examine the impact of the experimental manipulation on this variable.

Specifically, Study 1 revealed a paradoxical increase in perceived moral distance following the imagined contact manipulation, suggesting a potential *rebound effect* (Macrae et al., 1994). Studies 3 and 4 replicated this tendency, showing similar counterintuitive mean patterns, although the effects did not reach statistical significance. Taken together, these findings suggest that, despite previous evidence demonstrating a robust negative association between positive contact with an outgroup and moral distance toward them (Vezzali et al., 2023), the positive contact that imagined contact manipulations are designed to elicit may, in some cases, produce effects in the opposite direction to those hypothesised. This pattern underscores the need to further examine the potential effect size of imagined contact on moral distance, as no studies to date have directly addressed this question or compared it with the effect sizes emerging from cross-sectional research.

Clarifying this issue would provide valuable insights for future investigations, particularly in establishing the sample size required to detect such effects reliably and would ultimately contribute to a deeper understanding of how imagined contact interventions might promote generalised acculturation processes among native populations.

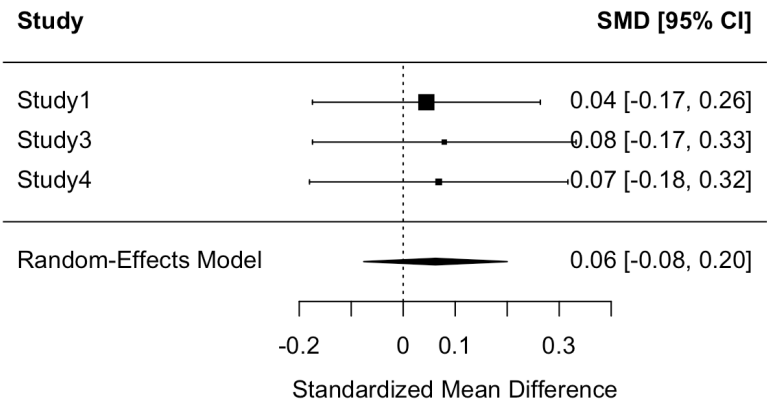
Given this pattern, we conducted two mini meta-analyses (following Goh et al., 2016) to integrate the results across studies and provide a more precise estimate of the overall effect of the manipulation on moral distance. Since moral distance was hypothesised and consistently emerged as the key mediator shaping natives' acculturation processes through serial indirect effects of STE, we specifically examined why the imagined contact manipulation did not produce a significant reduction in this variable. This approach allows us to assess whether the apparent inconsistencies are attributable to random sampling variation or whether they reflect a genuinely small effect of imagined contact on this specific variable. Additionally, we conducted a second meta-analysis on cross-sectional studies, which included both our own data and the studies conducted by Vezzali et al. (2023), to compare the two effect sizes. This comparison was aimed at examining whether the strength of the association between quality of contact and moral distance observed in correlational research would be replicated, or potentially reduced, when the relationship was tested experimentally through manipulation. By comparing these two sources of evidence, we sought to better disentangle the difference between naturally occurring, cross-sectional associations and the causal effects produced under controlled experimental conditions, thereby providing a clearer understanding of the actual impact and boundaries of imagined contact manipulations.

Results of the Mini Meta-Analysis on Manipulation Effect

We conducted a random-effects mini meta-analysis of our three experimental studies ($N = 811$). The estimated mean effect size was very small and not statistically different from zero $b = 0.062$, $p = 0.38$, 95% CI $[-0.0758, 0.200]$, indicating only a weak positive trend of the

manipulation on the outcome. Heterogeneity between studies was negligible ($\tau^2 = 0$, $I^2 = 0\%$), suggesting that the studies were consistent, and the lack of a significant effect is unlikely due to differences between studies. For the forest plot, see **Figure A1**.

Figure A1. *Forest Plot*



Results of the Mini Meta-Analysis on Cross-sectional associations

We conducted a random-effects mini meta-analysis including our three cross-sectional studies and three additional studies reported by Vezzali et al. in 2023 ($N = 1585$). All studies, except the last one by Vezzali et al. (2023), were conducted with Italian samples; the latter employed a British sample.

The analysis revealed a small-to-moderate negative overall effect $b = -0.29$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.34, -0.23]. This finding indicates that, on average, the association between quality of contact and moral distance is consistently negative across studies. The estimated heterogeneity was very low, $\tau^2 = 0.0005$ ($\tau = 0.022$), with $I^2 = 10.94\%$, suggesting that only about 11% of the total variability in effect sizes reflected true heterogeneity rather than sampling error. The test for heterogeneity was not significant, $Q(5) = 5.06$, $p = .41$, indicating that the observed effects were relatively homogeneous across studies. For the corresponding forest plot, see **Figure A2**.

Additionally, we examined the funnel plot asymmetry (see **Figure A3**) to assess the reliability of our studies in comparison with those conducted by Vezzali et al. (2023). A Kendall's tau test was performed to evaluate the relationship between the standard error and the observed effect sizes, in order to detect potential publication bias. The results revealed a Kendall's tau of -0.33 ($p = .469$), indicating no evidence of publication bias and supporting the reliability of the studies included in our analysis, especially ours.

To further explore the comparability between the studies, we conducted a moderation analysis testing the clustering variable (our studies vs. those by Vezzali et al., 2023) to examine whether the small amount of heterogeneity observed could be attributed to differences between the two groups. Results indicated no significant moderation effect, $b = -0.00$, $p = .983$, 95% CI $[-0.12, 0.12]$, suggesting that the effect sizes were consistent across both sets of studies.

Lastly, we assessed the influence of each study on the overall effect size, and we examined the diagnostic statistics obtained from the influence analysis. Results indicated that most studies did not exert a disproportionate influence on the overall model estimates. However, Study 4 showed relatively high values on several influence indices ($rstudent = -1.89$, $dffits = -0.90$, Cook's distance = 0.72), suggesting that this study had a noticeable impact on the aggregated effect size. Despite this, the exclusion of Study 3 did not substantially alter the overall results, indicating that the findings of the meta-analysis remain robust and not driven by a single influential case.

Overall, these results show a robust and statistically significant negative association between quality of contact and moral distance, with minimal heterogeneity among the included studies.

Figure A2. *Forest Plot*

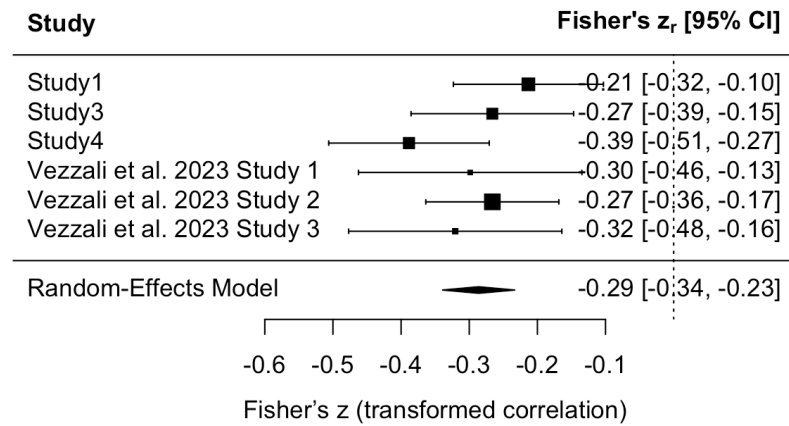
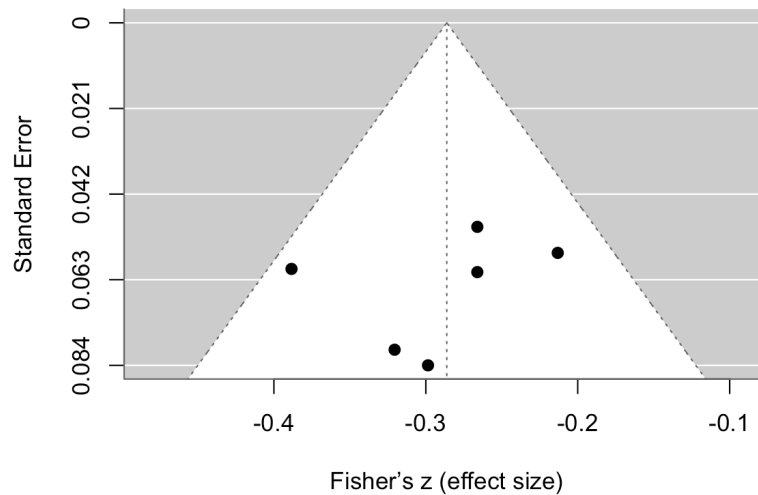


Figure A3. Funnel Plot



Discussion

The present study aims to clarify the impact of the imagined contact manipulation on reducing moral distance, with the broader goal of fostering more positive and generalised acculturation processes among natives. To address this aim, we conducted two mini meta-analyses. The first tested the overall effect size of the imagined contact manipulation on moral distance across our experimental studies, while the second examined and compared this effect

with the one emerging from a mini meta-analysis of cross-sectional studies, including both our data and that reported by Vezzali et al. (2023).

This twofold approach allowed us to assess whether the association between contact and moral distance, well established in correlational research, would hold when tested through experimental manipulation. By comparing the two meta-analytic outcomes, we aimed to determine whether the weaker or nonsignificant effects observed in experimental settings are more likely attributable to limitations in the imagined contact manipulation itself, or rather to differences inherent in the type of relationship (causal vs. correlational) captured by the two research designs.

These findings suggest that, across our experimental studies, imagined contact did not significantly reduce moral distance, with the estimated effect size being very close to zero and with a low difference between the studies. In other words, the results point to a negligible and non-robust impact of imagined contact manipulations on moral distance. However, despite the low effect size, this is a counter-hypothetical, supporting a potential *rebound effect* (Macrae et al., 1994) of the manipulation. Conversely, results from the mini meta-analysis on cross-sectional associations between quality of contact and moral distance across our own studies and Vezzali et al. (2023) ones definitely support the main negative association between the variables.

Overall, this evidence suggests that, within the STE framework, imagined contact manipulations may not constitute a reliable strategy for eliciting positive contact and, in turn, fostering natives' acculturation processes through reductions in moral distance. This points to the potential value of exploring alternative intergroup contact paradigms, such as manipulations based on a moral framework (as in Study 2) or more immersive approaches like virtual reality-based intergroup contact (e.g., Tassinari et al., 2024).

Several limitations must be acknowledged as well. The first one relates to the small number of studies included. This limited sample of studies reduces the statistical power of the meta-analysis, making it difficult to detect small effect sizes reliably. Indeed, the meta-analysis revealed a very small mean effect size for the imagined contact manipulation that was not statistically significant. This suggests that, even if a positive trend of the manipulation existed, the analysis may have been underpowered to detect it. Moreover, while heterogeneity across the studies was negligible, which indicates that the studies were consistent with one another, the limited number of studies further constrains the generalizability of the results. In other words, the meta-analytic estimate provides only a tentative indication of the effect, and caution is required when interpreting the findings. Lastly, using a broad migrant category such as “Africans” across the studies may have led participants to activate different representations of the target group, thereby reducing the impact of the manipulation. However, considering that broad categories were used both in the experimental manipulation and in the measure of quality of contact, and given the stronger effect sizes observed in the cross-sectional studies, we believe that this potential bias is only one of the potential factors that may have weakened the effectiveness of the imagined contact manipulation. Additionally, in Study 3b we included an image of the target African migrant group, as recommended by Stathi et al. (2014), yet the results mirrored those obtained in the other studies. Nevertheless, future research should disentangle the specific contribution of this potential source of bias.

However, the evidence provided by these meta-analyses sheds light on the experimental investigation of the previously observed cross-sectional association between quality of contact and moral distance. These results suggest the need to examine whether, and under what conditions, an imagined positive contact with a migrant can effectively promote moral similarities between the two social groups. Specifically, it is likely that for the manipulation to be effective, it should include elements highlighting moral similarities, as was the case in the

mass media contact manipulation used in Study 2. However, it is also possible that this type of manipulation may generate negative effects on moral perceptions when interpreted according to the *rebound effect* proposed by Macrae and colleagues (1994). In this regard, future studies could further explore the potential causal relationship between these variables by systematically testing the actual efficacy of the various imagined contact manipulations used in the literature, both on the main outcomes typically examined (see Miles & Crisp, 2014, for a meta-analysis) and on our key variables of interest. This would help determine whether our null and counter-hypothetical findings stem from the specific manipulation we employed or from the possibility that imagined contact requires an additional mediator to shape moral perception and consequently natives' acculturation preferences.

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