

The Mediating Role of Perceived Threat in the Relationship between Casual Contact and Attitudes towards Syrian Refugees in Turkey

OKAN CEM ÇIRAKOĞLU

Department of Psychology, Başkent University, Ankara, Turkey
okanc@baskent.edu.tr

KÜRŞAD DEMİRUTKU

Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling, TED University, Ankara, Turkey

OĞUZCAN KARAKAYA

Department of Sociology, Başkent University, Ankara, Turkey

MS received July 2019; revised MS received October 2019

Turkey hosts the largest Syrian refugee population in the world. As an attempt to understand antecedents of residents' attitudes towards Syrian refugees, the present study aimed to investigate the relationships between contact experience, perception of threat, and the attitudes. Specifically, we hypothesized that perception of threat would mediate the relationship between contact experience and the attitudes. Frequency of different contact types, threats associated with economic, cultural, and criminal risks, and attitudes towards male or female targets based on preferred social distance were subjected to analyses in an adult sample of 170 women and 183 men. Results revealed a full mediation effect both for female and male Syrian refugee targets. We discussed the findings referring the observed nature of contact as mostly being casual, threat level being high, and attitudes being relatively negative within a specific media-effects framework.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, casual contact, perceived threat, attitudes, prejudice

Introduction

Turkey has become the host of the largest refugee population in the world since the Syria conflict has emerged. According to the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior Directorate General for Migration Management (25 May 2019), more than 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees live in Turkey. The total number of Syrians in Turkey with unregistered refugees is estimated to be around 4.5 million.

The majority of the Syrian population in Turkey live in Istanbul and cities near to the Turkey–Syria border. Only 116,989 Syrians continue to live in temporary shelter centres. The Council of Ministers of the Republic of Turkey issued a regulation on temporary protection, as per Article 91 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection on 22 October 2014. The Temporary Protection Regulation offers access to services including education, healthcare and the labour market for Syrian nationals, stateless persons and refugees coming from Syria. After the mass immigration of Syrians to Turkey and the increase in the numbers of Syrian people who live outside temporary shelter centres, residents began to share neighbourhoods with them. Because of hosting a huge number of Syrian people in the country, several safety and security concerns appeared among Turkish citizens. This article aims to explore safety and security concerns of Turkish people related to Syrian refugees as well as attitudes towards them. Although Syrian people in Turkey have the legal status of ‘under temporary protection’, they will be called Syrian refugees and refugees in this article.

It is frequently stated that refugees are often perceived as a security threat to the host country and this perception has been associated with prejudice. For example, [Aukot \(2003\)](#) reported that the Turkana community (an ethnic group in Kenya) blamed the Dinka (a Sudanese ethnic group) in Kakuma Refugee Camp for several destructive acts including raping women. Liberian refugees in Ghana are blamed for engaging in illegal activities such as armed robberies, wife-stealing, prostitution, drug dealing and gambling ([Porter et al. 2008](#)). Similarly, during the Great Lakes (a region comprising Uganda, Western Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and the north-eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo) refugee crisis in 1994, host countries blamed refugees for increased violence in their own countries ([Prunier 2008](#)). [Sunpuwan and Niyomsilpa \(2012\)](#) investigated the perceptions of the Thai public on refugees and migrants from Myanmar and reported that refugees and migrants were perceived to be a threat to public safety and they may carry diseases. They were also perceived as competing with Thais for jobs and national resources. In another survey, [Wike et al. \(2016\)](#) found that the majority of the sample in Poland, Greece, Hungary, Italy and the United Kingdom agreed that refugees are one of the major threats to their countries. In addition, host countries may be afraid of contagious diseases coming from abroad, which can cause prejudice against immigrants ([Kraut 2010](#)). The summarized studies reveal that economic, cultural and security concerns about refugees become more and more important for host communities and these concerns reinforce worldviews of people who tend to perceive outsiders as a threat ([Esses et al. 2017](#)).

In the context of Syrian refugees, there are some indicators that safety and security concerns and worries are increasing in host countries ([Dempster and Hargrave 2017](#)). For instance, in a survey carried out to measure inter-group relations between Lebanese communities and Syrian refugees in Bekaa and in Akkar region of Lebanon, 90 per cent of Lebanese reported that they felt a threat to their livelihood and values from Syrian refugees ([Harb and Saab 2014](#)). In another survey with Lebanese and Syrian respondents in different regions of Lebanon, nearly 50 per cent of Lebanese respondents stated that they did not

feel safe in most regions and 13 per cent of them reported assaults by Syrians (Al Sharabati and Nammour 2015). The results of a recent poll by Ipsos MORI (2016) with 16,000 people in 22 countries indicated that most of the respondents have negative attitudes towards refugees. Since the very high proportion of refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey consisted of Syrians, the results related to Turkey can be interpreted as negative attitudes towards Syrians. Although there are some differences between countries in terms of attitudes, 85 per cent of respondents in Turkey and 65 per cent in Italy and South Africa agreed with the proposition that the number of immigrants in their country was too high and most of the respondents from Turkey, India and Hungary supported the idea of closing borders to refugees. These studies indicate that public opinions and attitudes towards Syrian refugees are mostly negative as compared to other countries in Europe and other parts of the world. Depending on the previous research, it can also be argued that the perception of security and safety concerns of Turkish people seems to be similar in the countries that host larger populations of Syrian refugees (e.g. Lebanon). A recent survey with 1,153 Turkish and 421 Arabic adult respondents in Turkey showed that Turkish respondents have some security and safety concerns regarding Syrian refugees as well (World Food Programme Turkey Country Office 2017). Nearly half of the Turkish respondents believed that, since the immigration of Syrian refugees, the crime rates have increased. In dire opposition, the official data indicated that only 1.32 per cent of criminal incidents in Turkey involved Syrians (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Internal Affairs 2019).

Representations of Syrians in the media may also have important effects on these negative attitudes. Pandir *et al.* (2015) investigated the representation of Syrian refugees in Turkish press and found that the refugees were frequently depicted as poor, in need of help and threats to social security. Taken together, these results might suggest that being a low-status out-group, Syrian refugees in Turkey can be the targets of paternalistic or contemptuous prejudice (Fiske *et al.* 2002).

Stephan and Stephan (2000) attempted to organize previous findings and theories into a comprehensive threat model of prejudice and proposed four domains of threats: realistic, symbolic, negative stereotypes and inter-group anxiety. In this theory, realistic threat refers to 'any threat to the welfare of the group or its members, and the focus is on subjectively perceived conflict between groups' (Stephan *et al.* 2005 : 2). Symbolic threats are related to the worldview of the host community and focus on differences in values, beliefs, morals and attitudes between groups. Esses *et al.* (1993) found that Canadians' prejudice towards different out-groups were related to the perception of symbolic threats. The third domain of threat concerns negative stereotypes. Negative stereotypes of out-groups can lead to perception among in-group members and can increase negative expectations related to behaviours of the out-group members (Hamilton *et al.* 1990). The final domain, namely inter-group anxiety, explains that people feel threatened because they have negative personal expectations such as being embarrassed and rejected resulting from interaction with inter-group members (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986; Gudykunst 1995).

Studies showed that previous contact with refugees seems to be related to attitudes. In his well-known social-contact hypothesis, [Allport \(1954\)](#) proposed that social contact with a stigmatized group may result in positive attitude change if the contact occurred under certain circumstances such as cooperative conditions and equal status between members of rival groups. Findings of a study by [McLaren \(2003\)](#) indicated that even close social contact in the form of friendships with members of minority groups can reduce negative attitudes towards immigrants and their willingness to deport legal immigrants from the country. [Voci and Hewstone \(2003\)](#) found that inter-group contact had a positive effect on out-group attitudes and a negative effect on subtle prejudice. In this study, inter-group contact also resulted in reduced anxiety and improved out-group perception. In another study by [Fetzer \(2011\)](#), findings showed that close relations with immigrants resulted in positive attitudes towards immigration and immigrants.

On the other hand, several studies revealed that casual contact may not have resulted in positive evaluations of out-groups. For instance, in a US sample, [Powers and Ellison \(1995\)](#) found that casual interracial contacts among African American and White out-groups have not been associated with positive attitudes. Similarly, a study carried out in four Western European countries by [Hamberger and Hewstone \(1997\)](#) revealed that only inter-ethnic friendships reduced negative attitudes towards immigrants. All other types of inter-ethnic contact such as at work and in the neighbourhood had few positive impacts on anti-immigrant attitudes. Findings of a more recent study also indicated that, while interreligious friendships reduced negative attitudes towards the religious out-group, casual contact with the out-group produced less positive attitudes ([Kanas et al. 2015](#)). Similarly, findings of a study carried out in Greek islands near to the Turkish coast revealed that, although refugees used these islands as relay stations to the Greek mainland, mere exposure to refugees suffices in generating hostility and negative attitudes among locals ([Hangartner et al. 2019](#)). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that different types of social contact (i.e. intimate, close or casual) may have differential effects on attitudes towards out-groups and other variables may contribute to negative evaluations of out-groups.

Studies suggested that, although attitudes towards refugees may be formed depending on personal experiences, it is difficult to ignore the contribution of the concerns of one's community and nation in the formation of attitudes ([Hatton 2016](#); [Katwala and Somerville 2016](#)). For example, in a study with a German population, political persecution and war were found to be valid reasons for asylum-seeking but socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and refugees were not significant variables ([von Hermanni and Neumann 2019](#)). In this study, the level of the respondents' fear of crime was the most significant moderator of the perceived threat from refugees. The size of the refugee population seems to be another important variable in forming attitudes towards refugees. Previous studies indicated that the size of the refugee population might influence attitudes differentially across national and regional levels, such that, at the national level, a higher population size was associated with more negative attitudes,

whereas, at the regional level, the opposite effect holds true (Weber 2015). However, [Schlueter and Davidov \(2013\)](#) argued that, when the refugee population size was low, this left more room for media effects because less contact was expected, thereby limiting information gathering by the residents, resulting in higher perceptions of threat. This analysis suggests that it is the opportunity for contact in relatively smaller areas that might facilitate positive attitude formation. For the case of Turkey, which hosts the largest Syrian-refugee population in the world, this population is especially concentrated in the southern Syrian border cities, with the higher rates in the city population (80.52 per cent in Kilis, 26.50 per cent in Hatay, 21.60 per cent in Şanlıurfa and 21.45 per cent in Gaziantep), whereas, in Ankara, the capital of Turkey, from where the data of the present study was gathered, the Syrian-refugee population size is low (1.66 per cent). Therefore, we inferred that evaluations of the Syrian refugees would relatively be formed based on media effects, which are negative, and the contact experience would be more casual than systematic, meeting the conditions proposed by [Allport \(1954\)](#). Thus, we expected a higher perception of threat and negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees.

In addition, we expected perceptions of threat to mediate the relationship between casual contact and attitudes towards Syrian refugees. Although previous studies focused on gender differences in attitudes towards refugees, to the best of our knowledge, how refugee evaluations might be associated with the gender of the target person was not investigated. Therefore, in the present study, we measured the attitudes towards female and male targets separately and tested the mediation model for each target.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics			
Variables	Female <i>n</i> (%)	Male <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i>
Marital status			
Single	96 (57.14)	72 (42.86)	168
Married	67 (38.29)	108 (61.71)	175
Divorced/widowed	7 (70)	3 (30)	10
Education			
High school and lower	67 (44.08)	85 (55.92)	152
University and higher	103 (51.24)	98 (48.76)	201
Employment			
Unemployed	14 (53.85)	12 (46.15)	26
Employed	84 (38.89)	132 (61.11)	216
Student	44 (66.67)	22 (33.33)	66
Housewife	17 (100)	–	17
Retired	11 (39.29)	17 (60.71)	28

Method

Participants and Procedures

Three hundred and fifty-three individuals who were residents in Ankara participated in this study on a voluntary basis. The sample consisted of 172 women (48.72 per cent) and 181 men (51.28 per cent). The mean age for women was 33.98 ($SD = 13.02$) and 37.71 ($SD = 13.92$) for men. The mean age for the entire sample was 35.88 ($SD = 13.59$) ranging from 16 to 87. Data of the present study was gathered in Ankara, the capital of Turkey, where the ratio of Syrian refugees to the city population is 1.66 per cent. Sample characteristics are provided in Table 1.

All scales and demographic information questions were printed on two-sided paper and shuffled before administration. Therefore, all participants had an equal chance of taking one of the female or male vignettes.

Measures

Demographic Information Questions (DIQ): In the demographic data sheet, participants were asked to indicate their age, gender, education, employment status, frequency and context of social contact with Syrian refugees. In order to assess the level of social contact, a list of possible contact places was listed (Table 2) and participants were asked to report the frequency of their social contact with Syrian refugees on a three-point Likert scale (0 = Never, 1 = Sometimes, 2 = Frequently). In analyses, the mean scores of the frequencies of contact were used. Higher mean scores on this index indicated more frequent contact in various contexts. In addition, participants were asked to report their predictions for the Syrian-refugee population returning to their homeland in percentages using two questions: '(1) In

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for the Types of Contact

Context of casual contact	Never, <i>n</i> (%)	Sometimes, <i>n</i> (%)	Frequently, <i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i>
Neighbourhood	120 (34.2)	160 (45.6)	71 (20.2)	351
Apartment	303 (86.8)	32 (9.2)	14 (4)	349
As your neighbour	304 (87.1)	29 (8.3)	16 (4.6)	349
At your child's school	267 (78.8)	45 (13.3)	27 (8)	339
At your workplace or school	214 (61.5)	89 (25.6)	45 (12.9)	348
In neighbouring workplaces	146 (42.1)	147 (42.4)	54 (15.6)	347
In establishments where you shop	74 (21)	187 (53.1)	91 (25.9)	352
On your daily route	30 (8.5)	139 (39.4)	184 (52.1)	353
On public transport	47 (13.4)	152 (43.4)	151 (43.1)	350
At health institutions	69 (19.5)	142 (40.2)	142 (40.2)	353
In governmental institutions	103 (29.2)	148 (41.9)	102 (28.9)	353

your opinion, what is the probability of Syrians to be able to return to their country?’ and ‘(2) In your opinion, what percentage of Syrians would return to their country?’

Attitude scale: The scale was developed by Çırakoğlu (1999) and used in several studies towards different target groups such as people with drug addiction (Çırakoğlu and İşin 2005) and homosexuals (Çırakoğlu 2006). Since the scale aims to measure depending on social distance, it is possible to use it in different ways, in this case towards Syrian refugees. The scale consisted of 20 Likert-type items that were designed to measure attitudes in terms of preferred social distance. In the present study, three items were excluded from the scale due to irrelevant content in the refugee context. Sample items of the attitude scale included: ‘Suppose you took the same course with person described above. Would it be disturbing for you to have a joint project with this person?’ and ‘Would it be disturbing for you to share the same room in a dormitory?’

In the present study, the scale begins with the instruction either ‘X is a Syrian woman’ or ‘X is a Syrian man’, which served as vignettes. Participants were asked to respond to the questions by thinking of this hypothetical Syrian woman or man to state their agreement on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = Certainly no, 5 = Certainly yes). Although in the original scale higher scores indicate positive attitudes toward target groups, in the present study, scale scoring was reversed to make statistical interpretation easier. Therefore, higher scores in this scale indicated more negative attitudes. Four items were reverse scored before analyses. In statistical analyses, mean scores for the total scale were used. Internal consistency coefficients of the 17-item attitude scale were 0.92 for both female and male vignettes.

Perceived Threat Scale (PTS): In order to assess participants’ perceptions of safety and security issues regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey, 27 Likert-type items were generated by the authors depending on surveys, news and personal experiences. The items in the scale were generated based on several security and safety concerns of Turkish citizens regarding Syrian refugees such as economic concerns, rights given to them and crime. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) suggested a single-component solution with 21 items (details are presented in the ‘Results’ section). Sample items included ‘Syrian refugees launching their own business reduce the profit of Turkish citizens’, ‘Syrian refugees are receiving better quality health services than the citizens of the Republic of Turkey’ and ‘The crimes committed by Syrian refugees are not punished adequately’. The participants were asked to use a five-point Likert-type scale to indicate their agreement for a given statement (1 = Not agree at all, 5 = Certainly agree). Higher mean scores indicated higher perceived threat.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We first investigated the nature of contact by examining the percentages of reported contact in different contexts. The results (Table 2) indicated that the

lowest percentage of contact was reported in one's living space (close neighbourhood, 87.10 per cent; and apartment building, 86.80 per cent) and the highest percentage was observed in transportation (daily route, 52.10 per cent; and public transport, 43.10 per cent). Participants also reported that they sometimes (rather than never and frequently) had contact in shopping areas (53.10 per cent). These results suggest that our sample consisted of participants who basically had more casual contact than real contact with the Syrian refugees.

Second, participants had negative predictions about Syrian refugees returning to their homeland. As compared to a 50 per cent chance level, on average, they expressed low levels of probability ($M = 28.12$ per cent, $SD = 28.03$ per cent, $t(350) = -14.618$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.78$) and rate ($M = 22.99$ per cent, $SD = 24.42$ per cent, $t(350) = -20.718$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.11$) of return to their homeland. Therefore, participants in the present study seem to expect that the Syrian-refugee population will be permanent in Turkey.

One-sample *t*-tests were run to investigate the levels of perceived threat from and attitudes towards the Syrian refugees in the current sample relative to the neutral attitude represented by scale midpoints of 3.00. Analyses revealed significant results that participants reported relatively high levels of perceived threat ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.93$, $t(352) = 15.198$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.81$) and negative attitudes ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.04$, $t(352) = 4.335$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.24$). Thus, our sample seems to be contained individuals having relatively high levels of perceived threat from and negative attitudes towards the Syrian refugees.

We finally conducted independent-sample *t*-tests to compare the levels of attitudes directed towards female and male targets. Participants reported higher negative attitudes towards male Syrian refugees ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.95$) than the females ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.06$, $t(351) = 3.998$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.43$). These results suggest that male targets are evaluated more negatively than female targets.

Overall, our sample can be described as containing participants who had casual contact with and negative evaluations regarding the Syrian refugees, especially for male targets, coupled with negative expectations that the Syrian-refugee population would return to their homeland.

PCA Results of the PTS

A reliability analysis with the 27-item PTS was performed before PCA and six items were eliminated from the scale because of their low corrected inter-item correlations. The remaining items were assessed in terms of the factorability of the data. An anti-image correlation matrix was used to assess the sampling adequacy of items. Since Bartlett's test of sphericity was large and significant and the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was very high ($KMO = 0.96$), factorability was assumed.

An initial PCA with a 21-item scale revealed two components. However, examination of the scree plot indicated a single-component solution. Then, the PCA was replicated by forcing the number of components to one with a cut-off level of

Table 3

PCA Results for Perceived Threat Scale			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Loading
13. Syrian refugees threaten to the security of the country	3.88	1.19	0.842
14. Syrian refugees threaten the security of the streets	3.79	1.20	0.832
25. More rights are bestowed to Syrian refugees than Turkish citizens	3.79	1.27	0.811
26. Syrian refugees benefit from health services easier than citizens of Turkey	3.83	1.24	0.800
21. Granting of citizenship rights to Syrian refugees is a threat to national security	4.08	1.18	0.799
22. Syrian refugees' continuation of their own cultural customs are disrupting the culture of this country	3.58	1.30	0.792
10. The crimes committed by Syrian refugees are not punished adequately	3.61	1.21	0.787
9. Syrian refugees launching their own business reduce the profit of Turkish citizens	3.92	1.23	0.785
18. Syrian refugees having too many children consume the resources of the country	3.73	1.26	0.775
15. Since Syrian refugees provide cheap labour, Turkish citizens lost their jobs	4.10	1.20	0.763
17. I won't feel safe unless Syrian refugees stay in Turkey	3.48	1.36	0.753
27. I am worried that the Syrian refugees would change the cultural structure in Turkey	3.67	1.29	0.746
6. Syrian refugees do not follow social norms	3.93	1.12	0.738
23. Syrian refugees working illegally cost the country's economy	4.15	1.12	0.714
8. I'm worried about Syrian refugees having a say in the administration of Turkey in the future	3.70	1.40	0.704
1. I feel worried about my safety when confronted with Syrian refugees	3.38	1.29	0.697
5. Social welfare organizations provide more aid to Syrian refugees than citizens of the Republic of Turkey	4.06	1.20	0.685
20. Syrian refugees are receiving better quality health services than the citizens of Republic of Turkey	3.34	1.32	0.665
12. Syrian refugees do not pay taxes	4.00	1.15	0.657
3. Syrian students cause security problems in schools	3.09	1.26	0.645
4. Syrian refugees have brought some diseases in Turkey	3.61	1.26	0.624
Eigenvalue	11.689		
Variance (%)	55.66		
Cronbach's alpha	0.95		

n = 353. The items in the original scale are in Turkish and are translated into English by the authors for presentational purposes.

Table 4

Correlation Matrices, Means and Standard Deviations of the Study Variables for Female (F) and Male (M) Targets

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age		0.12	0.12	0.20**	0.07	0.04	-0.02
2. Participant gender	0.16*		-0.04	0.09	0.03	-0.02	-0.08
3. Probability of returning	-0.01	-0.07		0.52**	-0.23**	-0.32**	-0.11
4. Rate of returning	-0.03	-0.06	0.67**		-0.35**	-0.45**	-0.23**
5. Attitude	0.11	0.06	-0.22**	-0.28**		0.70**	0.18*
6. Perceived threat	-0.03	0.04	-0.29**	-0.33**	0.67**		0.28**
7. Contact	-0.04	-0.08	-0.18*	-0.21**	0.28**	0.42**	
M_F	34.47	-	30.75	24.59	3.02	3.58	0.78
SD_F	11.96	-	30.11	25.85	1.06	1.02	0.42
M_M	37.33	-	25.33	21.30	3.46	3.92	0.81
SD_M	15.00	-	25.43	22.80	0.96	0.77	0.41

Correlations for female and male targets are above and below the diagonal line, respectively.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

0.45. The single-component solution explained 55.66 per cent of the variance. The internal consistency for the total scale was 0.95. Table 3 presents the PCA results.

Correlations among the Variables of the Study

Correlation coefficients were computed by splitting the sample participants who responded to the female and male targets separately. The correlational analysis revealed several significant relationships among the variables in an expected way (Table 4). The perceived probability of returning and the rate of returning were positively associated. These variables were also significantly and negatively correlated with the main variables of the study, namely attitudes toward refugees, perceived threat and social contact. As expected, perceived threat and attitudes toward refugees had the strongest positive relationships ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.01$ for female targets; and $r = 0.67$, $p < 0.01$ for male targets). Social contact was significantly and positively correlated with attitudes ($r = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$ for female targets; and $r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$ for male targets) and with perceived threat ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$ for female targets; and $r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$ for male targets). Therefore, as the frequency of contact increased, both the perceived threat and the negative attitudes increased.

Model Testing

In order to explore the direct and indirect effects in the proposed model, the PROCESS Macro in SPSS was used. PROCESS is a conditional process-modelling programme developed by Hayes (2018) that allows researchers to examine each

Table 5

Regression Coefficients in the Mediation Models for Female and Male Targets					
Female target	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	95% CI
Mediator model					
Constant	3.21	0.13	24.24	<0.0001	[2.95, 3.48]
Contact	0.79	0.13	6.19	<0.0001	[0.54, 1.04]
Participant gender	0.13	0.11	1.21	ns	[-0.08, 0.34]
DV model					
Constant	0.14	0.29	0.47	ns	[-0.44, 0.71]
Contact	0.01	0.15	0.08	ns	[-0.28, 0.30]
Threat	0.84	0.08	10.52	<0.0001	[0.68, 0.99]
Participant gender	0.07	0.11	0.65	ns	[-0.15, 0.29]
Male target					
Mediator model					
Constant	3.03	0.18	16.98	<0.0001	[2.68, 3.38]
Contact	0.70	0.17	4.00	<0.0001	[0.35, 1.04]
Participant gender	0.01	0.15	0.08	ns	[-0.28, 0.30]
DV model					
Constant	0.38	0.22	1.74	ns	[-0.05, 0.82]
Contact	-0.05	0.14	-0.39	ns	[-0.33, 0.22]
Threat	0.74	0.06	12.88	<0.0001	[0.62, 0.85]
Participant gender	0.10	0.11	0.83	ns	[-0.13, 0.32]

regression pathway in mediation, moderation and moderated-mediation models. The relative indirect effects in the model were subjected to follow-up bootstrap analyses with 5,000 samples and a 95 per cent confidence interval estimate.

We tested a mediation model by using Model 4 in the PROCESS macro where the frequency of contact was the predictor variable, perceived threat was the mediator and the attitudes towards Syrian refugees were the outcome variables. We ran the same mediation test separately for female and male targets because the attitudes were measured specific to female and male target vignettes. The gender of the participants was entered into the model as a covariate. It was hypothesized that perception of threat mediates the effect of contact on attitudes toward Syrian refugees across vignette conditions (male–female).

Results revealed that the mediation effect was significant for both female and male targets. All coefficients are presented in Table 5. Contact was a significant predictor of perceived threat and perceived threat was a significant predictor of attitude. Contact was not a significant predictor of attitude after controlling for perceived threat, suggesting full mediation. Approximately 45 per cent and 50 per cent of the variance in attitudes was accounted for by the predictors for female and male targets, respectively ($R^2 = 0.45$, $F(3, 168) = 46.071$, $p < 0.0001$ for female targets; and $R^2 = 0.50$, $F(3, 177) = 59.371$, $p < 0.0001$ for male targets). As presented in Figure 1, testing the indirect effect revealed significant results. All in all, support for a full mediation model was obtained.

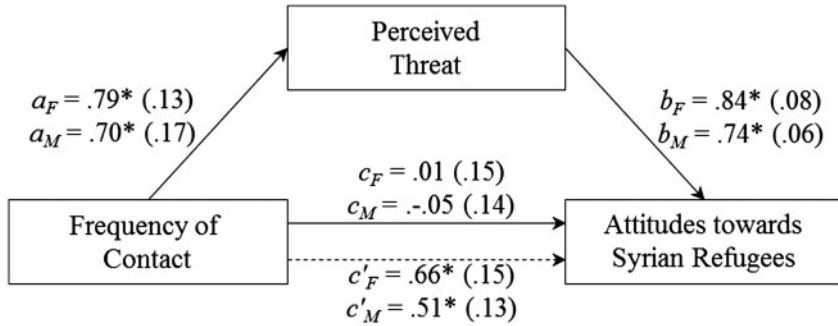


Figure 1.

Proposed Mediation Model

This figure shows the indirect effect of the frequency of casual contact on attitudes towards refugees through perceived threat for female (F) and male (M) targets separately. Unstandardized coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses) are reported. a is the direct effect of contact on perceived threat and b is the direct effect of perceived threat on attitudes. c is the effect of contact on attitudes without including perceived threat as a mediator. The dotted line and c' denote the effect of contact on attitudes obtained in Model 4 test when including perceived threat as a mediator. $*p < 0.0001$.

Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to investigate the relationships between contact, perception of threat and attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. Specifically, we tested a mediation model in which we treated perception of threat as a mediator between contact and attitudes. Overall, results indicated full mediation for both female and male target Syrian refugees. Before elaborating on the tested model, we first turn to the implications of the descriptive characteristics of the study sample.

The level of perceived threat was high and attitudes towards Syrian refugees were negative as indicated by the above-midpoint reports of the sample. This indicates that our sample comprised individuals who had negative evaluations of the target group. In a similar vein, when the frequencies of different contact opportunities were investigated, we observed that the majority of the sample reported more casual contact than contact requiring close acquaintance. This suggests that respondents in our study mostly had casual contact with Syrian refugees. When individuals have casual contact, more negative attitudes may be expected because such encounters can reinforce the publicly held stereotypical beliefs about the target group due to a lack of meaningful interpersonal interaction that might change stereotypical judgements (Fetzer 2000). Consistently with the previous findings, we also observed that reported contact was associated with a higher threat perception from Syrian refugees and negative attitudes towards them (Kanas *et al.* 2015; Hangartner *et al.* 2019). Thus, our results fit in with the existing literature suggesting that, when conditions of contact as proposed by Allport (1954) are not met in casual-contact

conditions, targets of prejudice can be evaluated negatively (Schlueter and Davidov 2013).

An important observation in the data was that participants in our sample had negative expectations about the probability and rate of return in the Syrian-refugee population. These expectations converged with the higher perceived threat and negative attitudes. Given the cross-sectional and correlational nature of the study, one possibility is that perceived threat and negative attitudes in time might be justified by developing such beliefs or people holding such beliefs for other reasons might perceive a higher threat from the Syrian-refugee population and might develop negative attitudes in return. Future research with a longitudinal design is needed to settle the exact nature of this process.

We also predicted that the process that would translate casual contact into negative attitudes would involve an increased threat perception. Traditionally, contact has been treated as a direct antecedent of attitudes towards outgroups, which resulted in research designs that have taken conditions of contact into account (e.g. Paluck *et al.* 2019). However, in the Turkish case of refugees, direct contact might even be impossible with the target group. Since the Syrian-refugee population is concentrated in southern border cities in Turkey, the likelihood of real contact is low for the majority of the citizens who reside in other parts of Turkey. This leaves casual contact as the sole opportunity for those people to interact with Syrian refugees. Eventually, they might gather indirect information at best through the media. When the media coverage in Turkey about the Syrian refugees was investigated, it was clearly observed that the content concentrated on various threats to the residents (Pandir *et al.* 2015). Therefore, in Turkey, threat perception can become more proximal than the contact experience in the formation of attitudes towards Syrian refugees. Our findings about contact reports of the sample seem to support this rationale. In agreement with this, we predicted and observed that the threat perception fully mediated the relationship between contact and negative attitudes. Thus, the present study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating that casual contact is associated with negative attitudes through the mediation of perceived threat (Powers and Ellison 1995; Hamberger and Hewstone 1997; Kanas *et al.* 2015).

The same full mediation effect was obtained for both female and male targets in the present study. This might suggest that the Syrian-refugee stereotype is a very abstract representation in the minds of participants disregarding the gender component of the category membership (Judd and Park 1988; Park and Hastie 1987). Although participant gender differences were widely investigated in previous research and more negative attitudes were observed for men than for women (see Anderson and Ferguson (2018) for a meta-analytical review), to the best of our knowledge, there is no previous research specifically addressing the links between perceived threat or attitudes and the gender of the refugees. Our results are in line with this general tendency, although we are unable to compare and contrast target gender effects with the current literature.

That the participants did not differentiate the target gender in the mediation of attitudes might also be explained by the simple wording of our vignettes. Our vignettes in attitude measurement ('X is a Syrian man/women') perhaps were so general that they did not activate gender characteristics associated with the refugee categorization. A more detailed depiction of the target Syrian refugee might have resulted in a differentiation in the effect. As previously mentioned, Syrian refugees are represented in the media with discriminative discourse and associated with crime scenes in a stereotypical manner. In addition, in daily conversations among Turkish citizens, they are usually called 'Syrians' with negative connotations. All these factors may have caused a stereotype of 'Syrian' refugees to be consolidated and become a narrowed category. Therefore, in model testing, perceived threat may have been associated with the Syrian-refugee category more strongly than individuals or gender effect.

One of the limitations of the present study was that the contact measurement concentrated on mostly casual-contact experiences. Therefore, our findings cannot explain attitudes that might have been observed in close-contact conditions. A second limitation is that our sample consisted of individuals living Ankara, where the Syrian-refugee rate is low. Although these results might be generalized to cities similar in Syrian-refugee concentration, it might not be generalized to Turkish populations who have frequent contact with a larger Syrian-refugee population such as Kilis, Hatay and Şanlıurfa, which are the border cities of Turkey. Nevertheless, previous research conducted in the border cities of Turkey has revealed that, even in these cities, the Turkish citizens have negative stereotypical representations of the Syrian refugees, no matter they believed they shared similar cultural and religious background (Özdemir 2017). Therefore, further testing of the model proposed in the present study in such samples by measurement refinements might reveal results similar to the present research.

In conclusion, our study suggests that, in casual-contact conditions, perceived threat contributes to negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees. Given that threat perception is high, attitudes are negative and the perceived likelihood that Syrian refugees would return to their homeland is low, our research suggest that these experiences might implicate negative outcomes in daily social interaction in the long run. Therefore, the perceived threat of the Turkish residents must be dealt with by government and media organizations to make it more realistic. Moreover, if the Syrian-refugee population in Turkey internalizes these negative stereotypes held by the Turkish residents, it is possible that they might choose to segregate themselves from the host community. The optimal solution for both groups is to create environments that might facilitate smooth interaction and support practices for living together. An example of such practices can be the enactment of laws on eliminating stereotypical language use and biased news coverage in the media that might increase perceived threat. Also, municipalities, schools and non-governmental organizations may organize activities in which Turkish citizens can hear the true stories of individuals in real-contact conditions.

REFERENCES

- ALSHARABATI, C.** and **NAMMOUR, J.** (2015) *Survey in Perceptions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*. Beirut: Institut des Sciences Politiques, Université Saint Joseph.
- ALLPORT, G. W.** (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- ANDERSON, J.** and **FERGUSON, R.** (2018) 'Demographic and Ideological Correlates of Negative Attitudes towards Asylum Seekers: A Meta-analytic Review'. *Australian Journal of Psychology* 70(1): 18.
- AUKOT, E.** (2003) "'It Is Better to Be a Refugee Than a Turkana in Kakuma": Revisiting the Relationship between Hosts and Refugees in Kenya'. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 21(3): 73–83.
- ÇIRAKOĞLU, O. C.** (1999) 'Cooperative Contact and Attitudes toward Mental Illness'. Unpublished master's thesis, Middle East Technical University, Ankara.
- ÇIRAKOĞLU, O. C.** (2006) 'Perception of Homosexuality among Turkish University Students: The Roles of Labels, Gender, and Prior Contact'. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 146(3): 293–305.
- ÇIRAKOĞLU, O. C.** and **İŞİN, G.** (2005) 'Perception of Drug Addiction among Turkish University Students: Causes, Cures, and Attitudes'. *Addictive Behaviors* 30(1): 1–8.
- DEMPSTER, H.** and **HARGRAVE, K.** (2017) *Understanding Public Attitudes towards Refugees and Migrants*. Working Paper 512. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- ESSES, V. M., HADDOCK, G.** and **ZANNA, M. P.** (1993) 'Values, Stereotypes, and Emotions as Determinants of Intergroup Attitudes'. In Mackie, D. M. and Hamilton, D. L. (eds) *Affect, Cognition and Stereotyping*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, pp. 137–166.
- ESSES, V. M., HAMILTON, L. K.** and **GAUCHER, D.** (2017) 'The Global Refugee Crisis: Empirical Evidence and Policy Implications for Improving Public Attitudes and Facilitating Refugee Resettlement'. *Social Issues and Policy Review* 11(1): 78–123.
- FETZER, J. S.** (2000) *Public Attitudes toward Immigration in the United States, France, and Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- FETZER, J. S.** (2011) *The Evolution of Public Attitudes toward Immigration in Europe and the United States, 2000–2010*. Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies. San Domenico di Fiesole: European University Institute.
- FISKE, S. T., CUDDY, A. J. C., GLICK, P.** and **XU, J.** (2002) 'A Model of (Often Mixed) Stereotype Content: Competence and Warmth Respectively Follow from Perceived Status and Competition'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82(6): 878–902.
- GAERTNER, S. L.** and **DOVIDIO, J. F.** (1986) 'The Aversive Form of Racism'. In Dovidio, J. F. and Gaertner, S. L. (eds) *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, pp. 61–90.
- GUDYKUNST, W. B.** (1995) 'Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory: Development and Current Status'. In Wiseman, R. L. (ed.) *Intercultural Communication Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 8–51.
- HAMBERGER, J.** and **HEWSTONE, M.** (1997) 'Inter-Ethnic Contact as a Predictor of Blatant and Subtle Prejudice: Tests of a Model in Four West European Nations'. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 36(2): 173
- HAMILTON, D. L., SHERMAN, S. J.** and **RUVOLO, C. M.** (1990) 'Stereotype-based Expectancies: Effects on Information Processing and Social Behavior'. *Journal of Social Issues* 46(2): 35–60.
- HANGARTNER, D., DINAS, E., MARBACH, M., MATAKOS, K.** and **XEFTERIS, D.** (2019) 'Does Exposure to the Refugee Crisis Make Natives More Hostile?'. *American Political Science Review* 113(2): 442–455.
- HARB, C.** and **SAAB, R.** (2014) *Social Cohesion and Intergroup Relations: Syrian Refugees and the Lebanese Nationals in The Bekaa and Akkar*, <https://data2.unhcr.org/es/documents/download/40814> (accessed June 2019).
- HATTON, T. J.** (2016) 'Immigration, Public Opinion and the Recession in Europe'. *Economic Policy* 31(86): 205–246.
- IPSOS MORI** (2016) *Global Views on Immigration and the Refugee Crisis*. London: Ipsos MORI.

- JUDD, C. M.** and **PARK, B.** (1988) 'Out-group Homogeneity: Judgments of Variability at the Individual and Group Levels'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54(5): 778–788.
- KANAS, A., SCHEEPERS, P.** and **STERKENS, C.** (2015) 'Interreligious Contact, Perceived Group Threat, and Perceived Discrimination: Predicting Negative Attitudes among Religious Minorities and Majorities in Indonesia'. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 78(2): 102–126.
- KATWALA, S.** and **SOMERVILLE, W.** (2016) *Engaging the Anxious Middle on Immigration Reform: Evidence from the UK Debate*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- KRAUT, A. M.** (2010) 'Immigration, Ethnicity, and the Pandemic'. *Public Health Reports* 125(Suppl 3): 123–133.
- MCLAREN, L. M.** (2003) 'Anti-immigrant Prejudice in Europe: Contact, Threat Perception, and Preferences for the Exclusion of Migrants'. *Social Forces* 81(3): 909–936.
- STEPHAN, W. G.** and **STEPHAN, C. W.** (2000) 'An Integrated Threat Theory of Prejudice'. In Oskamp, S. (ed) *Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, pp 23–36.
- ÖZDEMİR, E.** (2017) 'The Perceptions of Syrian Refugee in Turkey'. *The Journal of Defense Sciences* 16(1): 115–136.
- PALUCK, E. L., GREEN, S. A.** and **GREEN, D. P.** (2019) 'The Contact Hypothesis Re-evaluated'. *Behavioral Public Policy* 3(2):129–158.
- PANDIR, M., EFE, I.** and **PAKSOY, A. F.** (2015) 'A Content Analysis on the Representation of Syrian Asylum Seekers in the Turkish Press'. *Marmara Journal of Communication* 24: 1–26.
- PARK, B.** and **HASTIE, R.** (1987) 'Perception of Variability in Category Development: Instance-versus Abstraction-based Stereotypes'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53(4): 621–635.
- PORTER, G., HAMPSHIRE, K., KYEL, P., ADJALOO, M., RAPOD, G.** and **KILPATRICK, K.** (2008) 'Linkages between Livelihood Opportunities and Refugee–Host Relations: Learning from the Experiences of Liberian Camp-based Refugees in Ghana'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21(2): 230–252.
- POWERS, D. A.** and **ELLISON, C. G.** (1995) 'Interracial Contact and Black Racial Attitudes: The Contact Hypothesis and Selectivity Bias'. *Social Forces* 74(1): 205–226.
- PRUNIER, G.** (2008) *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- REPUBLIC OF TURKEY MINISTRY OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS** (2019) http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik (accessed May 2019).
- SCHLUETER, E.** and **DAVIDOV, E.** (2013) 'Contextual Sources of Perceived Group Threat: Negative Immigration-Related News Reports, Immigrant Group Size and Their Interaction, Spain 1996–2007'. *European Sociological Review* 29(2): 179–191.
- STEPHAN, W. G., LAUSANNE RENFRO, C., ESSES, V. M., WHITE STEPHAN, C.** and **MARTIN, T.** (2005) 'The Effects of Feeling Threatened on Attitudes toward Immigrants'. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 29(1): 1–19.
- SUNPUWAN, M.** and **NIYOMSILPA, S.** (2012) 'Perception and Misperception: Thai Public Opinions on Refugees and Migrants from Myanmar'. *Journal of Population and Social Studies [JPSS]* 21(1): 47–58.
- VOCI, A.** and **HEWSTONE, M.** (2003) 'Intergroup Contact and Prejudice toward Immigrants in Italy: The Mediation Role of Anxiety and the Moderational Role of Group Salience'. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 6(1): 37–54.
- VON HERMANNI, H.** and **NEUMANN, R.** (2019) "'Refugees Welcome?": The Interplay Between Perceived Threats and General Concerns on the Acceptance of Refugees—a Factorial Survey Approach in Germany'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(3): 349–374.
- WIKE, R., STOKES, B.** and **SIMMONS, K.** (2016) *Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.
- WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME TURKEY COUNTRY OFFICE** (2017) *Social Cohesion in Turkey: Refugee and Host Community Online Survey*, <https://www1.wfp.org/publications/turkey-social-cohesion-refugee-host-community-online-survey> (accessed July 2019).