Majority–minority acculturation preferences concordance as an antecedent of attitudes towards immigrants: The mediating role of perceived symbolic threat and metastereotypes

Camilla Matera [a,*], Cristina Stefanile [b], Rupert Brown [c]

[a] Department of Education and Psychology, University of Florence, Via di San Salvi, 12, Pad. 26, 50135 Florence, Italy
[b] Department of Health Sciences, University of Florence, Via di San Salvi, 12, Pad. 26, 50135 Florence, Italy
[c] School of Psychology, Sussex University, Pevensey 1, Brighton BN1 9QH, UK

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ABSTRACT

Through an experimental design, we investigated the effects of majority–minority acculturation preferences concordance and immigrants' generational status on Italians' attitudes towards Albanian immigrants. The role of perceived threat and metastereotypes in mediating this relationship was examined. Participants ($N = 178$) were categorized into different levels of culture maintenance and intercultural contact concordance. Findings showed that discrepancies in the contact dimension affected majority members' attitudes towards immigrants. Both perceived threat and metastereotypes were found to mediate the relationship between contact discrepancies and attitudes towards immigrants. Culture maintenance concordance interacted with immigrants' generational status in influencing majority members' attitudes. This research confirmed the importance of taking into account the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between majority and immigrant acculturation preferences, confirming that the most positive attitudes were produced when immigrants were perceived to adopt the same strategy as the majority, especially with respect to intergroup contact.

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1. Introduction

Acculturation is commonly described as the meeting of cultures and the changes that arise following contact between individuals who belong to groups of different cultural background (Sam, 2006; Sam & Berry, 2006). Social psychologists have shown an increased interest in acculturation in the last few decades, which might be due both to the growing importance of understanding the link between culture and human behaviour, and to the increase in worldwide migration (Brown & Zagefka, 2011; Sam & Berry, 2006). As a matter of fact, our societies are becoming increasingly multicultural. In these kinds of contexts it is common for people to develop attitudes both towards immigration in general and towards specific immigrant groups, as well as to hold certain acculturation attitudes. According to Berry (1997), immigrants can adopt different acculturation preferences, depending on their orientations towards maintaining their own heritage culture and towards interactions with

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individuals from other cultural groups: *Integration* is when immigrants desire both culture maintenance and intergroup contact; *assimilation* is when immigrants appreciate intergroup contact and not culture maintenance; *separation* is when immigrants want to conserve their heritage culture and do not seek intercultural interactions; *marginalization* is when neither culture maintenance nor intergroup contact are considered as valuable.

Even though the original definition of acculturation identified it as a mutual process, comparatively few studies have been carried out in order to investigate acculturation preferences among majority members, termed acculturation *expectations* (Berry, 2006). These expectations involve two dimensions as well, namely attitudes towards immigrants' culture maintenance and attitudes towards intercultural contact on the part of those immigrants, resulting in the same four acculturation attitudes when these two dimensions are combined.

Some researchers have focused not only upon minority acculturation preferences, but also on majority expectations regarding those preferences, and on the degree of concordance between immigrants' and majority members' acculturation attitudes (Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault, & Senécal, 1997; Navas Luque, Rojas Tejada, & García Fernández, 2011; Phelps, Ommundsen, Türken, & Ulleberg, 2013; Piontkowski, Rohmann, & Florack, 2002; Zagefka & Brown, 2002). Intergroup attitudes do not form in a vacuum, but depend on the interplay between immigrants' preferences and majority group members' expectations about acculturation (Brown & Zagefka, 2011). In this paper we seek to extend previous findings in this field by examining how the interaction between perceived immigrants acculturation preferences and majority members' acculturation expectations can influence host members' attitudes towards immigrants.

Recent experimental evidence suggested that host members' attitudes towards immigrants are affected by immigrants' preferences for acculturation, with a substantial difference between the role of immigrants' desire for contact and immigrants' desire for culture maintenance (Celeste, Brown, Tip, & Matera, 2014; Matera, Stefanile, & Brown, 2011, 2012); perceptions of immigrants' desire for contact strongly impacted majority members' attitudes towards them: more favourable attitudes were expressed towards immigrants who seemed to endorse a desire for contact with the majority group. The effects of the desire for contact dimension (Berry, 1997) were noticeably stronger than those of the desire for culture maintenance dimension. Both in Italy (Matera et al., 2011, 2012) and in California, USA (Celeste et al., 2014), two quite different intergroup contexts, immigrants' perceived desire for contact seemed to be more relevant in influencing host members' attitudes than their perceived desire for culture maintenance. These findings are in line with previous correlational and experimental evidence that suggests that immigrants' desire for contact is the main determinant of the majority attitudes towards immigrants (Kosic, Mannetti, & Sam, 2005; van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998; Zagefka & Brown, 2002). Why is desire for contact on the part of immigrants so appreciated by majority group members? The relationship between immigrants' desire for intercultural contact and majority members' attitudes towards them seems to be mediated by metastereotypes (Matera et al., 2011) and perceived symbolic threat (Matera et al., 2011, 2012). In several independent studies Matera et al. (2011, 2012) found that host members' attitudes towards immigrants were influenced by host members' metastereotypes, which can be defined as the beliefs about the stereotypes that an outgroup holds about the ingroup (Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998); in turn, metastereotypes seemed to be affected by the immigrant group's perceived desire for contact. Thus, when majority members thought that African immigrants felt it worthwhile to seek out contact with members of the receiving society, this seemed to generate a perception that that immigrant group had a positive stereotype of Italians as tolerant, open-minded, kind and sensitive; in turn, this metastereotype was linked to a more favourable attitude towards the immigrant group as a whole.

In those studies symbolic threat also emerged as a significant mediator of the relationship between immigrants' perceived desire for contact and host members' attitudes towards them (Matera et al., 2011, 2012). Immigrants who seemed to accept the normative standards and common values of the receiving society were perceived as less threatening to majority members' traditional way of life, which led to more favourable intergroup attitudes.

With the present research, we build on and extend these findings, by taking into account not only immigrants' acculturation preferences, but also host members' acculturation expectations and the degree of concordance between them. Some previous research has underlined the important role that concordant or discordant majority–minority acculturation attitudes can play in determining intergroup attitudes (Piontkowski et al., 2002; Zagefka & Brown, 2002). We then aimed to investigate experimentally how acculturation concordance – distinguishing between concordance in terms of desire for contact and desire for culture maintenance – can influence host members' attitudes towards immigrants. Moreover, we wanted to test if metastereotypes and symbolic threat are still reliable mediators of any experimental effects attributable to those concordances (or discordances). Bourhis et al. (1997) and Piontkowski et al. (2002) argue that, when immigrants are seen to espouse acculturation strategies that are very different from those prevailing in the majority society, this will be regarded as threatening and negative intergroup attitudes are likely to result. In contrast, greater concordance between the majority's and the immigrants' acculturation strategies will be socially less problematic and will lead to more harmonious intergroup relations. There is some debate about how the degree of mismatch between majority and minority acculturation attitudes should be conceptualized and measured, and whether all discrepancies will be equally detrimental to intergroup relations (Bourhis et al., 1997; Meeus & Vanbeselaere, 2006; Piontkowski et al., 2002; Zagefka & Brown, 2002). Nevertheless, there is agreement about the basic hypothesis that when immigrants are perceived as preferring a very different acculturation strategy from the majority, the latter will find this threatening and will view the immigrants in a more negative light. In other words, majority members are likely to evaluate immigrants' acculturation orientations differently, depending on their own preferences (Piontkowski et al., 2002; Pfafferott & Brown, 2006; Roccas, Horenczyk, & Schwartz, 2000; Rohmann, Florack, & Piontkowski, 2006; Zagefka & Brown, 2002).