Integrated Threat and Intergroup Contact: An Analysis of Muslim Immigration to Finland

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Abstract
Guided by integrated threat theory, this study investigated the relationship between intergroup contact and the perception of threat from Muslim immigrants in Finland. The study also considered the potential influence of religiosity/religiousness on this relationship. Counter to what was predicted, results revealed threat to be positively correlated with real and symbolic threat, and negatively correlated with negative stereotypes. Religiosity was found to have no significant effect on the relationship between threat and intergroup contact. Theoretical implications for integrated threat and intergroup contact are discussed.

Keywords: Integrated threat theory, intergroup contact, religiosity, Finland, Islam
Foreigners arrived later and in smaller proportions to Finland than in most other European countries. That is why Finland is regarded as one of the most homogeneous in Europe (Korkiasaari & Söderling 2003; Heikkilä & Peltonen 2002). Until the 1970s, Finland was mostly an emigration country. A large proportion of Finnish emigrants went to Sweden for work. In the 1980s, Finland became an immigration country and started to receive more immigrants (Korkiasaari & Söderling 2003). Throughout the 1980s, up to 85% of the immigrants who came to Finland were Finns who had emigrated over the past decades. It is only since the 1990s that most immigrants were foreigners (Korkiasaari & Söderling 2003). Immigration to Finland (as refugees or as voluntary immigrants) from the 1970s to the 2000s was mainly from the former Soviet Union (Russia and Estonia), the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Somalia, the Middle East, Sweden, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Africa (Korkiasaari & Söderling 2003; Työ- ja Elinkeinotoimisto 2006).

The growing immigrant population in Finland, particularly the growing Muslim population is receiving increasing attention. Politicians, specifically members of the True Finns Party, have blamed Muslim immigrants for rising unemployment, violence, terrorism, and various other economic, and social problems in Finland (Finnish National Broadcasting Company, YLE 2011; Tarvas & Martikainen 2012). There is a slowly growing sentiment in Finland, as in many other parts of Europe that Muslim immigrants are a threat to the Finnish way of life.

To better understand Muslim immigration to Finland and the perception of threat from this immigration, the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954) and integrated threat theory (ITT) (Stephan & Stephan 1993, 1996) are employed. Allport (1954) stated direct contact between groups is an effective way to reduce prejudice. Stephan and Stephan’s (1993, 1996) ITT outlines four types of threat that comprise prejudice. Therefore, this study overall purpose is to examine the relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice toward Muslim immigrants in Finland from the standpoint of members of the dominant culture (native-born, Christian Finns). Moreover, as Muslims are a religious community immigrating to Finland, which is not a Muslim nation, we explore the potential effect of religiosity/religiousness on this relationship.

Finland

Most immigrants in Finland live near Helsinki. On the other hand, refugees are more equally spread out in Finland, as the government tries to also send them to rural areas (Heikkilä 2012). The conglomeration of immigrants in urban areas has led to problems, as many Finns see immigrants as a threat to infrastructure, economic security, and as culturally different (Tarvas & Martikainen 2012). The authors adds out that the Muslim population in Finland is somewhere between 50,000 to 60,000 (Tarvas & Martikainen 2012), which is more visible now than in the past because most Muslims come from the Middle East, Africa, or Asia (Sakaranaho 2010). A slow rise in unemployment, and in xenophobic political parties, coupled with the growth of the Muslim population in Finland has led to an increase in prejudice/Islamophobia in Finland (Jaakkola 2009).

Integrated Threat and Intergroup Contact

Negative attitudes or beliefs expressed through negative emotions or communication toward an out-group is prejudice (Duckitt 1992). When the dominant culture perceives a minority group to be a threat to its values and beliefs, prejudice will often develop. Key factors that affect the level of prejudice include: an individual’s personality, strength of membership in an ingroup, and perceived differences with the out-group (Pettigrew & Meertens 1995). Stephan and Stephan (1993, 1996) outlined integrated threat theory (ITT) to highlight the causes of
prejudice. Four kinds of threat can lead to prejudice: realistic threats, symbolic threats, negative stereotypes, and intergroup anxiety.

Threats (real or perceived) to economic, political and physical resources make up the first kind of threat, realistic threats (Stephan & Stephan 1996). Prejudice will develop when people perceive limited resources, and competition from others for limited resources. Politicians often link immigrant groups to economic problems. The True Finns for example have blamed various immigrant groups for rising unemployment in Finland (Finnish National Broadcasting Company, YLE 2011).

The second kind of threat is symbolic threat, or when the dominant culture thinks a minority culture have different beliefs, norms, values, and worldviews. This perception can lead to misperceptions, fear and threat (Stephan & Stephan 1993). Islam in Finland for example has a negative connotation because many Finns think it is foreign; the media paints the religion as a rather violent cultural group (Jaakkola 2009).

Negative stereotypes, or negative ways in which members of the dominant culture expect the minority culture to behave (Stephan & Stephan 1993) is the third kind of threat. Negative stereotypes inhibit communication and bring about fear between the dominant and minority groups (Craig & Richeson 2012; Verkuyten 1997). The media often paints Muslims as violent, and links the entire religion and culture to terrorism (Jaakkola 2009), an extremely negative stereotype.

Intergroup anxiety is the fourth kind of threat. This is a fear individuals have when they interact with members of an out-group. As intergroup anxiety increases, threat level increases (Islam & Hewstone 1993). Intergroup anxiety is an individual level fear, a fear people have when directly interacting with an out-group member. The other threats are group level threats. Intergroup anxiety is thus not included in this analysis because it is an individual level fear, and this study focuses on group level fears. Previous ITT researchers have made a similar designation (Stephan & Renfro 2002; Tausch, Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns 2007).

Allport (1954) asserted increased contact between different groups leads to reduced levels of prejudice between the groups. This contact hypothesis has become the backbone of intergroup contact theory. Pettigrew and Tropp’s (2005) meta-analysis of 500 studies since the 1950s found support for Allport’s assertion. Overall, intergroup contact reduces prejudice between different groups (ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, etc). We therefore offer the following hypothesis, based on the research concerning threat and prejudice:

\[ H: \text{There will be a negative relationship between threat and contact.} \]

**Relationship between Religiosity, Threat, and Intergroup Contact**

Religiosity is “the degree of one’s connection or acceptance of their religious institution, participation in church attendance and activities, as well as one’s regard for the leaders or the religion and church” (Alston 1975: 166). Religiosity has been found to predict an individual’s argumentativeness (Stewart & Roach 1993), level of political involvement (Author One, 2013), and use of secular media (Buddenbaum 1996), to name a few. Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2011) found Muslims were more likely to self-report higher levels of religiosity than Christians. In some European nations, where religion is not openly expressed, high levels of religiosity can lead to exclusion and a lack of contact between groups (Author One, 2013). In Finland conflicts between Muslim and Christians Finns have emerged over the expression of religion (Kyllönen 2012). As Finland is a relatively secular Christian nation, this new religious Muslim population has presented a challenge to many traditionally secular Finns. Furthermore, the True Finns, a far-right wing political party in Finland has argued Muslims are unable to be and do not want to be
Finnish because of their devotion to Islam (Tarvas & Martikainen 2012). Thus, to better understand the relationship between religiosity, intergroup contact, and threat, the following research question is posed:

**RQ:** To what extent will religiosity influence the relationship between threat and contact?

**Method**

**Participants and Procedures**

A total of 219 Finns participated in this study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 63 (\(M = 32.02, SD = 10.38\)). All participants were native born to Finland. Men made up 37.9% (\(n = 83\)) and women 62.1% (\(n = 136\)) of the sample. The sample was highly education: 5% (\(n = 11\)) the equivalent of at least 2-years in college, 59.8% (\(n = 131\)) the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree, 16% (\(n = 35\)) some graduate school, 19.2% (42) the equivalent of a graduate degree or beyond. Data were collected through self-administered online questionnaires in Fall 2012 on Survey Monkey. The researchers in collaboration with other researchers working on a larger research project, contact individuals via social networks and requested their participation in this study. This kind of sampling represents a snowball sampling. Participants did not receive financial compensation for participation.

**Measures**

All measures included demographic questions and the following measures: a measure of intergroup contact (González et al. 2008), a measure of symbolic and realistic threat (González et al. 2008), a measure of stereotypes (González et al. 2008), and a measure of religiosity (Croucher, Turner, Anarbaeva, Oommen, & Borton 2008). Surveys were prepared in English and in Finnish (suomi). After the instrument was written in English a native speaker of Finnish translated the survey. Bilingual speakers then back-translated it. The translated version was then compared to ensure accuracy (Cohen’s Kappa). See table 1 for means, standard deviations, correlations, and alphas associated with the study variables.

**Intergroup Contact.** Four items measured intergroup contact (González et al. 2008). Two sample items include: “How many Muslim friends do you have?” and “Do you have contact with Muslim students or co-workers?” The first item was rated from (1) none to (4) only Muslim friends. The remaining three items were rated from (1) never to (4) often. The alpha for the scale was .70 in the original González et al. (2008) study.

**Symbolic Threat.** Three items measured symbolic threat (González et al. 2008). The items were: “Finnish identity is being threatened because there are too many Muslims,” “Finnish norms and values are being threatened because of the presence of Muslims,” and “Muslims are a threat to Finnish culture.” Responses ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. A higher score indicated a stronger feeling of threat. The scale has shows high reliability of .89 (González et al. 2008).

**Realistic Threat.** To measure realistic threat, participants were answered three statements that assessed the effects of Muslims on the economic situation in Finland. The statements include: “Because of the presence of Muslims, people have more difficulties finding a job,” “Because of the presence of Muslims, people have more difficulties finding a house,” and “Because of the presence of Muslims, unemployment in Finland will increase.” Responses ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Higher scores indicate more threat. This assessment has also shown reliability, .80 (González et al. 2008).

**Stereotypes.** Individuals were asked to what extent the following trait adjectives described Muslims: violent, dishonest, unintelligent, friendly (reverse-scored), arrogant, kind (reverse-
scored), avaricious, and inferior. Responses ranged from (1) no, absolutely not, to (5) yes, certainly. The alpha for these traits was .83 (González et al. 2008).

**Measure of Religiosity.** This scale has 25 items that measure religiosity as a unidimensional item (Croucher et al. 2008). The first ten items are on a 7-point scale ranging from never to very often. A sample item includes: “I attend regularly scheduled religious services.” The remaining 15 items are on a 7-point scale ranging from not at all important to very important. A sample item includes: “Religion is important when I choose what books to read.” In the original study, the Cronbach alpha for this scale was .99. See Table 1 for means, standard deviations, alphas, and correlations for all study variables.

**Table 1**

**Means, Standard Deviations, Alphas, and Correlations for all Study Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Intergroup Contact</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) Realistic Threat</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Symbolic threat</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.68*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Negative Stereotypes</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>-.55*</td>
<td>-.52*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Religiosity</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01.

**Results**

**Hypothesis**

To test the hypothesis, Pearson product-moment correlations were conducted. The hypothesis proposed a negative relationship between threat and contact. This hypothesis was partially supported. In contrast to what was hypothesized, contact was positively correlated with real threat ($r = .22, p < .01$) and with symbolic threat ($r = .18, p < .01$). Contact was negatively correlated with the use of negative stereotypes ($r = -.20, p < .01$).

**Research Question**

To answer the research question, a multiple regression model was constructed using contact as the criterion variable and the following predictor variables: realistic threat, symbolic threat, negative stereotypes, and religiosity. Cross-product terms were created to test for interaction effects. Hierarchical regression analysis was then used to test for possible interaction effects (DeMaris 2004; Pedhazur 1997). Before testing for interaction effects, religiosity, realistic threat, symbolic threat, and negative stereotypes were all mean centered (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken 2003; Pedhazur 1997). The overall regression results are presented in Table 2.

The three kinds of threat were entered in model 1 ($R^2_{adj} = .04$). In model 2, religiosity was added to the model ($R^2_{adj} = .05, ΔF = 2.46, p = .12$). This proved to not be a significant improvement over model 1. In model 3, cross-product terms representing the interaction of threat
and religiosity were added to the model. However, these proved to be non-significant as a block of predictors ($R^2_{adj} = .05, \Delta F = 1.19, p = .32$). Therefore, model 1 was retained for final analysis. As Table 2 reveals, religiosity does not have an influence on the relationship between threat and intergroup contact.

Table 2

*Regression Model for Research Question*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regressor</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>-.10</td>
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<td>.03</td>
<td>-.09</td>
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<td>-.21</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic*Religiosity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypes*Religiosity</td>
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<td>.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>4.32**</td>
<td>3.88**</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2_{adj}$</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p < .05, **p < .01.*

**Discussion**

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis. First, the type of contact needs to be analyzed. McLaren (2003) explains how more contact between hosts and immigrants can decrease feelings of threat if the contact is deep enough. That is, relationships such as friendships are likely to positively alter hosts’ perceptions, whereas superficial relationships with neighbors or coworkers may not be efficient. The depth of contacts between Muslims and respondents may explain the fact that intergroup contact is positively correlated with real and symbolic threat in this study. Respondents’ anxiety to communicate with Muslims may have also contributed to an increase in their feelings of threat. High levels of anxiety prior to communication can turn an interaction into a negative experience. In the same way that positive
interactions can reduce feelings of threat, negative interactions are likely to increase them (Pettigrew & Tropp 2005). The Finnish communication style may be important to take into consideration when examining the relationship between anxiety, intergroup contact, and perceived threat since previous studies have shown that Finns report higher levels of communication apprehension than many other cultures (Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, & Richmond 1991).

Second, racial differences may be at play in why threat is positively, and not negatively, correlated with intergroup contact. Somali immigrants make up the largest Muslim immigrant group in Finland. This group identifiably looks different from the majority of the White Finnish population. For example, in reported hate crimes religion plays a minor role in Finland compared to ethnicity and nationality (Peutere 2009). In addition, according to Jaakkola (2005), as far as immigrants are concerned, Finns prefer the culturally and economically more similar Nordics and Anglo Saxons to the immigrants “who are visibly and culturally different from the native population, who come from countries with a lower standard of living and that are faraway” (p. xi). It would be beneficial to consider the potential interactions between the race of an immigrant and the immigrant’s religion when conducting research on threat. It is very possible members of some cultures are going to be less threatened by individuals if they look more like the dominant culture.

Third, religiosity did not have a significant effect on the relationship between intergroup contact and threat. Finland is one of the least religious nations in Europe (Ketola 2011). Even though nearly 75% of the people identify with the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, the official state church, only one out of seven practice religion on a regular basis (Ketola 2011). This shows a very low level of religiosity, and could explain why religiosity did not have an effect. In Finland religion is considered a private matter.

This study adds to our understanding of intergroup contact and threat in the following ways. First, few studies have empirically measured perceptions of the host culture toward immigrants. Scholars have theoretically described how the level of host conformity pressure and receptivity will affect immigrant willingness and motivation to adapt (Berry 2005; Kim 1988, 2001). It can be proposed that a dominant culture that is threatened by an immigrant group will be less receptive toward that immigrant group. Therefore, the dominant culture may either put extra conformity pressure on them and/or be less receptive toward the group because they do not want to include them as part of the dominant culture’s ingroup (Author one in press, 2013). Host cultural perception of immigrant groups is an integral part of the cultural adaptation process, and understanding these perceptions offers deeper insight into the adaptation process. Second, Finland, like many other Northern European nations has not historically been a nation of immigration. As immigration increases to Finland, and other Northern European nations, these nations will more than likely see: a rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric from political parties, and an increase in discrimination toward immigrants as competition for resources increases (Hargreaves 2000; Laurence & Vaise 2006; Stephan & Stephan 1996). This study, by showing the relationship between contact and threat demonstrates how simply getting groups together is not enough to reduce tension. Governments, communities, and individuals will need to work past superficial contact between groups to generate understanding between dominant and minority groups.

A potential limitation of this study is the measure of intergroup contact (González et al. 2008). While the measure had a high alpha and the translation was reliable, it is possible that it focuses too much on contact frequency, and not enough on contact quality. Only one question
focused on quality of contact. Contact quality is an integral part of enhancing intergroup attitudes (Pettigrew 1997; Shim, Bin Zhang, & Harwood 2012), and this measured focused heavily on quantity.

This study extended integrated threat and intergroup contact research to the study of Muslim immigration to Finland. The research also demonstrated that religiosity does not affect this relationship, at least not in the Finnish context. These results offer some support, while at the same time challenging aspects of the contact hypothesis. Future work should continue to explore threat and contact in nations that are experiencing immigration growth to better understand the dynamic relationships between immigration, threat/prejudice, and intergroup contact.
References


