



# Intergroup Contact, Perceived Attitudes, and Immigrants' Attitudes Towards Locals: The Case of Immigrants Living in Finland

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**Abstract:** Research on immigrant-host attitudes in Finland has flourished significantly over the past two decades. However, most of this research has focused on Finnish attitudes towards immigrants. Studies that examine immigrants' perception of the type of attitudes Finns have towards immigrants and immigrants' own attitude toward Finns are hard to come by. This study examines the relationship between intergroup contact and the perception immigrants have about the type of attitudes Finns have towards immigrants. In addition, it further explores the extent to which the perception immigrants have of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants predicts immigrants' attitudes towards Finns. In a sample of 104 immigrants and through the use of surveys, this study finds that positive contact experiences with Finns are positively related to favorable perceptions of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants, while negative contact experiences are negatively related to favorable perceptions of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants in Finland. In addition, the perception immigrants have of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants significantly predicted immigrants' attitudes towards Finns. Implications and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Finland; Intergroup Attitudes; Immigrants; Intergroup Contact; Perception; Immigration.

## 1. Introduction

The topic of immigration and intergroup relations between immigrants and members of the host society continues to be one of the most common topics on most political and media platforms in most Western countries, including Finland. The genesis of mass migration to Finland can be traced back to the 1990s with the return of Ingrian Finns and refugees from Somalia and former Yugoslavia. Since then, migration has been on a steady rise in Finland (see Statistics Finland, 2019, 2022). The immigrant population has grown from 1% in the 1990s to about 8% in 2022 (Statistic Finland, 2022). Today, the immigrant population stands between three hundred and three hundred and fifty thousand (Statistics Finland, 2022). Finnish attitudes towards immigration and immigrants are said to be mixed (Nshom, 2022; Yle, 2019a, 2019b). Previous research on the antecedents of these attitudes towards immigrants in Finland and in other parts of the world has been well documented over the past decades (see Esses, Jackson & Armstrong, 1998; Ervasti, 2004; Fussell, 2014; Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2009; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Jaakkola, 2000; Nshom & Croucher, 2014, 2017, 2018; Nshom, 2016; Markaki & Longhi, 2013; Paas & Halapuu, 2012).

However, research that focuses on the perception of immigrants about the attitudes members of the host society have towards immigrants based on their lived or contact experiences is hard to come by. In addition, studies that have considered the predictors of this perception are extremely scarce. The aim of this study is to fill this gap. This study particularly considers intergroup contact experiences as an important predictor of the perception immigrants have about locals' attitudes towards immigrants.

There is an abundance of research that examines the effect of intergroup contact on locals' attitudes toward immigrants or minority groups (see Nshom, 2016; Jaakkola, 2000; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008), but there is no study to the best of my knowledge that has considered the effect of immigrants' contact experiences (positive or negative) with members of the host society on the type of perception immigrants have about locals' attitudes towards immigrants. As our perception of others' behaviors can be influenced by our intergroup encounters and interactions with them (Ames, Fiske & Todorov, 2011), it is argued that positive intergroup contact experiences with Finns will be related to more favorable perception of Finns' attitudes towards immigrants while negative intergroup contact experiences will be related to less favorable perceptions of Finns' attitudes towards immigrants living in Finland.

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In addition, studies on immigrant-host relations can be considered one-sided because of their overwhelming or sole focus on the attitudes of members of the host Society towards immigrants and the antecedents of such attitudes. Attitudes can be positive or negative, favorable or unfavorable (see Allport, 1954). In fact, Allport (1954), who is considered the father of prejudice research, defines prejudice as “a feeling, favorable or unfavorable, toward a person or thing, prior to, or not based on actual experience” (p. 6). Immigrants’ attitudes towards members of the host society and the antecedents of such attitudes have been greatly ignored or neglected in the social psychological literature of intergroup relations. Such studies are extremely hard to come by. This study particularly examines the extent to which the perception immigrants have of locals’ attitudes towards immigrants predicts their own attitudes towards members of the host society. Based on relative deprivation theory (see Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin & Bialosiewicz, 2012) and attribution theory (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967), it can be argued that immigrants are likely to have unfavorable attitudes towards locals if they believe that they are deprived, disliked, or treated unfavorably by locals. This study significantly contributes to our understanding of mutual intergroup relations and to our understanding of Finnish-immigrant relations. This study agrees with Nshom, Mkong, and Sadaf (in press) that in order to better understand intergroup attitudes, we must adopt a mutual approach.

## 2. Intergroup Contact and The Perception of Locals’ Attitudes

As part of human cognition, we tend to form impressions about others, especially through our interactional experiences with them. This is sometimes referred to as person perception (Johnson, 2007). Person perception, as a phrase, “has historically referred to the perception of others that leads to judgments of traits and dispositions” (Johnson, 2007, 663). According to Trope and Gaunt (2003, 2), “person perception extracts the psychological dispositions of people from their observed behavior.” This becomes the foundation on which we form our impression of them.

On the other hand, according to the intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954). Contact between groups can affect the perception or impressions group members have towards each other. Within this line of research, there is an abundance of literature that suggests that contact between immigrants and members of the host society can cognitively transform the perceptions, impressions, and feelings of locals toward immigrants (Jaakkola, 2000; Nshom, 2016; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008; Nshom et al., 2022). Particularly, positive contact experiences have been proven to lead to more favorable thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, while negative contact experiences have been found to lead to more unfavorable thoughts and feelings towards minority groups such as immigrants (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001; Stephan et al., 2000, 2002; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Bachelor, 2003).

Contact has also been described and conceptualized as direct and indirect (see Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner & Stellmacher, 2007; Vezzali, Stathi & Giovanni, 2012; Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Giovannini & Wölfer, 2014; Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Trifiletti, & Di Bernardo, 2017). Direct contact refers to personal physical contact between groups, such as meeting or knowing someone personally or casually, while indirect contact refers to knowing about someone through a secondary source such as friends, media, books, etc. The relationship between contact and the perceptions locals have about immigrants has been widely studied in Finland and in other parts of the world (for example, Nshom, 2016; Nshom & Croucher, 2018; Jaakkola, 2000; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), but the effect of intergroup contact on immigrants has been greatly neglected and ignored. As intergroup contact is a shared experience between two people, it is important to examine the possible effects of intergroup contact experiences on members of both groups involved in the encounter. For this reason, the effect of intergroup contact experiences on the perception immigrants have of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants is considered.

There are two different ways through which people tend to form impressions of one another. These include “secondhand information (being told about someone) and direct behavioral experience (interacting with someone) ...” (Ames, Fiske Todorov, 2011, 420). Secondhand information can be associated with indirect contact experiences through which immigrants get to learn about Finnish attitudes and formulate their perceptions about Finnish attitudes towards immigrants. Examples of indirect contact opportunities within this context may include exposure to Finnish attitudes through narratives about Finns from friends, media, books, and the experiences of other people, etc. Direct behavioral experiences can be associated with direct contact experiences with Finns, through which immigrants formulate a certain perception of Finns’ attitudes depending on their evaluation of the quality or nature of the contact experience (positive or negative).

Specifically, this study empirically investigates the extent to which intergroup contact between immigrants and Finns is related to the perception immigrants have about Finnish attitudes towards immigrants. It is argued that positive contact experiences with Finns will be related to more favorable perceptions of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants, while negative contact experiences will be related to less favorable perceptions of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants. According to Ames et al. (2011), the most obvious way through which we form impressions about others is through interaction. Consequently, the following hypotheses are posed:

**H1a:** *Positive contact experiences with Finns are positively related to perceived attitudes.*

**H1b:** *Negative contact experiences with Finns are negatively related to perceived attitudes.*

### 3. Predicting Immigrants' Attitudes Towards Finns

Previous research on intergroup attitudes can be described as one-sided. This is because research on immigrant-host relations has overwhelmingly focused on host members' attitudes towards immigrant groups. For instance, studies that examine Finnish attitudes towards immigrants are numerous (see Jaakkola, 2000; Nshom & Croucher, 2014, 2017; Yle, 2019a, 2019b), but studies that examine immigrants' attitudes towards Finns are non-existent. Additionally, the antecedents of locals' attitudes towards immigrants are well established (Jaakkola, 2000; Nshom, 2016), but the factors that predict immigrants' attitudes towards locals are hard to come by. This study highlights how immigrants feel towards Finns and examines the perception immigrants have about Finnish attitudes toward immigrants as an important predictor of their own attitudes towards Finns. Particularly, it is expected that if immigrants perceive that Finns have favorable attitudes towards immigrants, they will be more likely to have favorable attitudes towards Finns. On the other hand, if immigrants believe Finns have less favorable attitudes towards immigrants, they would be more likely to have less favorable attitudes towards Finns as well.

This can be expected because, based on the relative deprivation theory, if immigrants believe that they are deprived relative to members of the host society or disliked by members of the host society, this may potentially lead to feelings of hostility, dislike, resentment, and anger towards members of the host society. According to Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, and Bialosiewicz (2012, 203) and Pettigrew (2016, 21), deprivation "postulates a subjective state that shapes emotions, cognition, and behavior." For example, Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) in their study found that there exists a relationship between relative deprivation and unfavorable attitudes towards outgroups.

In addition, according to attribution research, the type of impressions we form about the behaviors of others can influence our emotions and behavior towards them. Our interpersonal relations often depend on how and what we think about one another. For instance, we are likely to cooperate with someone we perceive to be trustworthy. We are also more likely to act aggressively when we perceive someone to be hostile (Alpers & Hanssen, 2022; Trope & Gaunt, 2003; Hamilton & Kuchinka, 2022). Based on relative deprivation theory (see for a review Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin & Bialosiewicz, 2012), this study explores the extent to which the perception immigrants have about the type of attitudes Finns have towards immigrants predicts their own attitudes towards Finns. As a result, the following research question is explored.

RQ1. To what extent are Finn's perceived attitudes related to immigrants' attitudes towards Finns?

This study advances our understanding of the way immigrants feel toward members of the host society and the factors that are likely to predict such feelings. For us to fully understand intergroup relations, it is important to adopt a mutual approach. This study advances our understanding of the mutual intergroup relations between Finns and immigrants living in Finland.

## 4. Method

### 4.1 Participants and Procedures

The data for this study was collected online among immigrants living in Finland through an online anonymous questionnaire distributed on social media. A quantitative approach was used because it was deemed the most appropriate approach to test the relationship between the variables empirically. All institutional and ethical clearances were obtained before starting the data collection process. Participants were made to understand that the study was completely voluntary and anonymous. Participation was free, and it took participants approximately 10 minutes to respond to the online questionnaire. The data was transferred and analyzed with SPSS statistical software. There was a total of 103 immigrants from 41 nationalities. Asylum seekers and refugees were not included in the study. This is because studies that focus on asylum seekers abound, and the focus of this study was on other long-term immigrants living in Finland. 25.2 % had a student status, 29 % were at work and had a work permit, 31 % had a permanent residence, and 14.6 % had acquired Finnish citizenship. All participants had been living in Finland for at least a year. The mean age for length of stay in Finland was 6 years. 4% had a high school certificate, 38.8 % had a bachelor's degree, 51.5 % had a master's degree, and 5.8 % had a doctorate degree. Out of (n=103), 38 % were men, while 61 % were women. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 58, and the mean age was 33.4 years.

## 5. Measures

The measures used in the online survey included a measure of attitude towards Finns, a measure of perceived attitudes, a measure of positive contact, and a measure of negative contact. The online survey was in English. See Table 1 for the means, standard deviations, correlations, alphas, and kappas for the study variables.

### 5.1 Attitude Towards Finns

A modified version of the feeling thermometer (see Haddock, Zanna & Esses, 1993; Meleady, Seger & Vermue, 2017) was used to measure immigrants' attitudes towards Finns. Participants were asked to indicate how cold (unfavorable) or warm (favorable) they felt towards Finns on a scale of 1 to 10 instead of 1 to 100 degrees as in the original scale. Higher scores represented more positive/favorable attitudes toward Finns, and lower scores represented less favorable/positive attitudes toward Finns.

## 5.2 Perceived Attitude

In order to measure the perception immigrants, have about Finns' attitude towards immigrants, the same modified version of the feeling thermometer (see Haddock, Zanna & Esses, 1993; Meleady, Seger & Vermue, 2017) was used. Participants were asked to indicate how cold (unfavorable) or warm (favorable) they believed Finns felt towards immigrants on a scale of 1 to 10 instead of 1 to 100 degrees as in the original scale. Higher scores indicated a more positive/favorable perception of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants, and lower scores indicated a less positive/favorable perception of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants.

## 5.3 Positive Contact

In order to measure positive contact with Finns, participants were asked to rate, on average, the extent to which they had positive/good contact experiences with Finns. Response options ranged from (1) Never to (5) extremely frequently. This scale was adapted from Barlow et al. (2012) and Meleady et al. (2017).

## 5.4 Negative Contact

In order to measure negative contact with Finns, participants were asked to rate, on average, the extent to which they had negative/bad contact experiences with Finns. Response options ranged from (1) Never to (5) extremely frequently. This scale was adapted from Barlow et al. (2012) and Meleady et al. (2017).

**Table 1:** Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations for Study Variables Variable.

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) Attitudes towards Finns	7.29	1.93	-			
(2) Perceived positive/favorable attitudes	5.36	2.09	.40**	-		
(3) Positive contact	3.65	1.01	.51**	.37**	-	
(4) Negative contact	2.34	1.01	-.43**	-.35**	-.46*	-

Note: \*\*  $p < .001$

## 6. Result

In order to test H1a and H1b, a Pearson correlation analysis was computed. As expected, the results indicated that positive contact with Finns was positively related with positive/favorable perceptions of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants ( $r = -.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). On the other hand, negative contact with Finns among immigrants was negatively related with positive/favorable perceptions of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants ( $r = -.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the results were significant. Thus, H1a and H1b were confirmed. See Table 1.

In order to understand the extent to which the perceived attitude is related to immigrants' attitudes towards Finns (RQ1), a linear regression analysis was constructed. Perceived attitudes served as the independent variable, while immigrants' attitudes served as the dependent variable. Results of the regression showed that immigrants had favorable/positive attitudes towards Finns ( $M = 7.29$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ). In addition, the perceived attitude was significantly related to immigrants' attitudes towards Finns ( $F = .19.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .16$ ). See Table 2 for full regression results.

**Table 2:** Regression Predicting Immigrants' Attitudes Towards Finns.

Variable	Standardized beta	SE	t
Intercept	5.29	0.49	10.94
Perceived favourable/ positive Attitude	.40**	0.08	4.42
F		19.56**	
R <sup>2</sup>		0.16	
R <sup>2</sup> <sub>adj</sub>		0.15	

Note: \*\*  $p < .001$

## 7. Discussion

This study set out with two main aims: based on the intergroup contact theory, this study sought to understand the relationship between contact with Finns and the perception immigrants have about Finnish attitudes towards immigrants. In addition, based on relative deprivation theory, this study investigated the association between the perception immigrants have about Finnish attitudes towards immigrants and their own attitude toward Finns.

First, just as it was expected, this study found that positive contact experience with Finns was related to more favorable perceptions of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants, and those with more negative contact experiences with Finns had less favorable perceptions of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants. This finding is in line with the contact hypothesis (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), which argues that intergroup contact can influence the type of perception groups have of one another. There is an abundance of research on the role of intergroup contact on the type of perceptions and attitudes locals have towards immigrants (see Nshom, 2016; Pettigrew, 1998), but studies that attempt to examine the relationship between contact with the type of perception immigrants have about locals' attitudes towards immigrants are hard to come by. This is the first study, to the best of my knowledge, towards this direction. Since intergroup contact is a shared experience between locals and immigrants, it is important to

understand its effects on both groups. This study suggests that more positive contact experiences with Finns are related with more positive impressions or perceptions regarding Finnish attitudes towards immigrants, and more negative contact experiences are related with less favorable/positive impressions or perceptions. This points to the fact that the type of contact experiences we have with members of a particular social group can define the type of perception we develop about them and their attitudes towards us.

This idea has been supported by several studies around the world. The perception the ingroup has about the way the outgroup perceives the ingroup has been associated with intergroup contact experiences (Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). For example, in a sample of Buddhist Thais, White Americans, and Hong Kong Chinese, negative contact with an outgroup was found to be related to the perception that the outgroup viewed them negatively. However, contrary to the findings of this study, positive contact was found to be related to the perception that the outgroup viewed them negatively (Techakesari, Barlow, Hornsey, Sung, Thai, & Chak, 2015). Despite this divergence on positive contact, it is clear that "contact allows individuals to gain critical insights about outgroup norms, values, and behavioral scripts" (Techakesari, p. 456), and our perception of how the outgroup feels about our group is shaped through interaction (Badri et al., 2022; Plant & Butz, 2006; Vorauer, 2003, 2006). In a similar study on meta dehumanization (which refers to the perception that one's group is perceived by an outgroup as less than fully human) (see Kteily, Hodson, & Bruneau, 2016) with 16 independent samples from 5 countries (the United States, Hungary, Greece, Spain, and Israel) regarding 8 different outgroups (people on welfare, Native Americans, Mexicans, Iranians, Palestinians, Muslims, Muslim refugees, and Roma people), Bruneau, Hameiri, Moore-Berg, and Kteily, (2021) studied the association between contact quantity and contact quality with metadephumanization. They found that contact quantity was weakly correlated with metadephumanization in a range of cultural contexts and the number of target groups. However, the contact quality was strongly related to metadephumanization in almost every context. Interestingly, these results were also supported longitudinally. Even though in this study we examined positive and negative contact rather than contact quality and quantity, both studies attest to the fact that our perception of how the outgroup feels about our group is shaped through interaction (Plant & Butz, 2006; Vorauer, 2003, 2006).

It is important to understand the factors that are important to the type of perceptions immigrants have about Finnish attitudes towards immigrants because the type of perception immigrants have about Finnish attitudes towards immigrants can potentially impact their acculturation process, integration process, socio-economic adaptation, and their psychological well-being as well. Yet, studies that study the perception of immigrants concerning locals' attitudes are hard to come across. In addition, based on the relative deprivation theory, the impressions immigrants have about the attitudes of Finns may, in turn, impact their attitudes towards locals. For this reason, another aim of this study was to examine the extent to which the perceptions immigrants have of Finnish attitudes predicted their own attitude towards immigrants. This study showed that the perception immigrants have about Finnish attitudes towards immigrants significantly predicted their attitude towards Finns.

On the other hand, research also suggests that our perception of how the outgroup feels about our group can also shape or affect our contact experiences. It can reduce our willingness for contact/interaction and increase intergroup anxiety (see Finchilescu, 2005; Kunst, Dovidio, Bailey, & Obaidi, 2022; Méndez, Góme, & Tropp, 2007; Stathi, Bernardo, Vezzali, Pendleton, & Tropp, 2020). For example, Vorauer and Sasaki (2009) in their study found that white Canadians who thought that Native Canadians had a negative view of them were less willing to meet with Native Canadians. They were also more likely to express negative views about them. Borinca, Tropp, and Nonso (2021) carried out an experimental study comparing participants in a negative metadephumanization and a positive metadephumanization and found that those in a negative metadephumanization were less willing to engage in future contact with the outgroup than those in the positive metadephumanization. Contact influences our perception of how the outgroup feels about our group, and our perception of how the outgroup feels about our group also influences our willingness for future contact. Moreover, according to Koktsidis (2014):

*"The frustration produced by our perception of others and our sense of injustice by comparison can be accurately described as relative deprivation... In many instances, people's feelings and reactions are based on perceptions that the circumstances of their lives are not providing benefits to which they feel entitled. Such perceptions may equally apply to relatively privileged individuals or members of groups who believe that they deserve better treatment or future"* (p. 3)

In addition, according to attribution research, the type of impressions we form about the behaviors of others can influence our emotions and behavior towards them. This study is the first study, to the best of my knowledge, to consider the perceptions immigrants have about Finnish attitudes towards immigrants as a predictor of immigrants' own attitudes towards Finns. Therefore, this study significantly contributes to our understanding of Finnish-immigrant relations from the immigrants' perspective. It is recommended that future research consider exploring other factors that may potentially predict immigrants' attitudes towards locals. For us to have a better understanding of intergroup relations, we need to adopt a mutual perspective. Studies that adopt a mutual approach are rare.

One of the limitations of this study is the nature of the sample. First, the sample was small. In addition, the sample did not represent every type of immigrant. For example, refugees were not included. Moreover, the data was collected online through personal and social media networks. This implies that the data is not necessarily

representative of the entire immigrant population in Finland. As a result, generalizations should be made with caution. Another limitation of this study has to do with measurement. The thermometer scale used in this study only helps us understand generic attitudes towards groups. It was used in this study because this study was interested in understanding attitudes from a generic perspective. It is, therefore, cautioned that the findings of this study can be interpreted from a general perspective. However, it is recommended that future research consider a much bigger, diverse, and representative sample of immigrants living in Finland. In addition, future research should consider exploring specific types of attitudes and measurements. In addition, it is recommended that future research consider a qualitative approach as well. A qualitative approach is more likely to provide a deeper understanding and explanation of some of the experiences of immigrants. Besides, it is evident that this is a sensitive topic, and people tend to sometimes respond to sensitive questions in ways that do not make them look bad. This is often referred to as social desirability bias (see Croucher, Nshom, Zeng & Diyako, 2019). Even though it was clearly stated on the questionnaire that participation was completely anonymous, the possible effect of social desirability bias in a study like this one cannot be ignored.

Despite these limitations, this study significantly contributes to our understanding of the extent to which contact experiences are related to the type of perceptions immigrants have about Finnish attitudes towards immigrants. In addition, this study significantly contributes to our understanding of immigrants' attitudes towards locals and the predictive role of the type of perception immigrants have of Finnish attitudes towards immigrants. As immigration is on the rise in Finland (see Statistics Finland, 2019), these types of studies are imperative.

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