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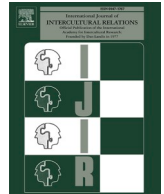
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## Review

## Perceived threat or perceived benefit? Immigrants' perception of how Finns tend to perceive them

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## ABSTRACT

Research on how immigrants are perceived by locals has flourished extensively within the past decades. Through the lens of integrated threat theory and the threat benefit model, this study examines immigrants' perceptions of how Finns tend to perceive them based on their lived experiences. In a sample of 103 immigrants from over 40 nationalities living in Finland, results indicate that overall, immigrants believe they are perceived more as a threat than a benefit to the Finnish society. Implications and opportunities for further research are discussed as well.

## Introduction

In 2015, more than one million refugees made their way into Europe. Since the beginning of the refugee crisis, attitudes towards immigrants have generally hardened in many European societies (Hartche, 2016). Social scientists for the past decades have provided many explanations as to why groups such as immigrants are often disliked by the majority or dominant members of society. Research in this field has led to the emergence of theories suggesting that the perception of threat from an outgroup largely contributes to negative attitudes and feelings of fear and prejudice towards those outgroups. Examples of such theories include: the realistic group conflict theory (Sherif, 1966), symbolic racism theory (Kinder & Sears, 1981), group position model (Blumer, 1958), the power/economic threat approach (Blalock, 1967), ethnic competition theory (Barth, 1969), and most recently the integrated threat theory (ITT) (Stephan & Stephan, 1996) and its revision tagged intergroup threat theory (see Stephan & Renfro, 2002; Stephan, Ybarra & Morrison, 2009).

ITT is the most recent conceptualization on this subject, and it combines previous theoretical approaches into a comprehensive and integrated model (Scheibner & Morrison, 2009). According to ITT, ingroup members are likely to have negative attitudes towards outgroup members such as immigrants and negatively prejudice them if they perceive them as a threat. There are four types of threat perceptions notably realistic threat, symbolic threat, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotype (Stephan & Stephan, 1996).

Since the inception of ITT, numerous studies and an abundant amount of research has emerged utilizing the integrated threat theory to examine how majority groups perceive immigrant minorities and the extent to which these perceptions are related to majority members' attitudes towards different immigrant groups in different parts of the world (see Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006 for a review). However, one of the setbacks of existing research on the perception of immigrant minorities, is that it has mainly focused on

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how majority groups or host societies perceive immigrants while neglecting immigrants' perceptions of how members of the host society tend to perceive them (e.g. Nshom & Croucher, 2014, 2017, 2018; Nshom & Arzamastseva, 2020; Nshom, Tovivich & Sadaf, 2020; Scheibner & Morrison, 2009; Stephan & Stephan, 1996, 2000; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, & Schwarzwald Tur-Kaspa, 1998; Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999). Studies that explore immigrants' perception of how local people tend to perceive them are non-existent. The main aim of this study is to introduce this new perspective to the already existing literature related to ITT and intergroup relations. Guided by the integrated threat model (ITT) (Stephan & Stephan, 1996) and the threat benefit model (TBM) (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016), this study particularly analyses immigrants' perception of how Finns tend to perceive them. In Finland, the literature on the perception of Finns towards immigrant minorities is well established (see Croucher, Aalto, Hirvonen & Sommier, 2013; Nshom, 2016; Nshom & Croucher, 2014, 2018), but studies that examine immigrants' perceptions of how Finns tend to perceive them to the best of our knowledge are non-existent. To better understand Finnish-immigrant relations, research should not only focus on how Finns perceive immigrants, rather it should additionally explore the perceptions of immigrants about how Finns perceive them based on their lived experiences. Immigration in Finland is on the rise and these types of studies are extremely important to better understand and improve relations between immigrants and majority Finns.

### *History of immigration in Finland*

The geographical location of Finland between Russia and Sweden indeed has an impact on the way migration from and to Finland is characterized. In the mid-17th century, the Roma people were the first immigrants to arrive in Finland from Sweden. Finland itself was part of the Kingdom of Sweden at the time and became part of the Grand Duchy of the Russian empire in 1809 (Korkiasaari & Söderling, 1998; Sievert, 2017). In the late 19th century, along with the ethnic Russians, the first Muslim Tatar merchants were among those who settled as a stable community in the Grand Duchy of Finland. After the independence in 1917, many Russians running from the Bolshevik Revolution migrated to Finland for asylum. According to the Ministry of the Interior, there were 33,000 Russian citizens in Finland in 1920. Many of them had come after 1917 as refugees (Kauranen & Tuori, 2000). As the Centre for Russian Immigrants moved from Helsinki to Paris, the concentration of Russians started steadily decreasing in the 1930s. At the start of the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland (second world war) in 1939, a big part of the Russians had to leave the country to other European countries.

According to Korkiasaari and Soderling (2003), disparities in economic structures, income levels were huge within the Nordic countries. The level of economic development was much lower in Finland than in the other Nordic countries (Korkiasaari & Soderling, 2003). In the mid-1960s, the first major migration wave emerged, from Finland to Sweden and with a much stronger wave in 1968–70, taking around a hundred thousand Finns to Sweden, to the rest of Europe and North America. This might have taken place because of the Nordic Common Labor Market, and greater need for low-skilled labor in Sweden, and the higher wages there. Therefore, until the 1970s, Finland was a rather less demanded destination and did not attract many immigrants. Those who came to Finland came for studies, short-term work, and marriage to a Finn. In the 1980s the welfare gap between Sweden and Finland diminished, and returning Finns outnumbered the immigrants. Until the end of the 1980s, some 85% of immigrants coming to Finland were returning migrants (Korkiasaari & Soderling, 2003). A new situation arose in the 1990s, with an increase in the Russian population in Finland caused by the refugees coming from the dissolved Soviet Union, the war in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and also from Chile, Iran, and Somalia (some Somali students came directly from the former Soviet Union). Finland joined the European Union in 1995 and thus became a part of the Schengen area in 2001, a development that increased mobility between the European countries and brought more people to Finland (OECD, 2017; Nshom & Khalimzoda, 2019). By 2015, all foreign-born accounted for over 6% of the Finnish population, and the native-born children of the foreign-born accounted for a further 1%. These numbers remain small – both by international standards and when compared to other Nordic countries (OECD, 2017). In 2019, after the Swedish and Sami, the largest population by language in Finland were Russian, Estonian, Arabic, English, and others (Statistics Finland, 2020).

### *How immigrants are perceived in Finland*

Studies that looked at the years from 1987 to 1999 show that Finns' perception became more positive after the recession year of 1993 towards immigrants, especially towards tourists, students, language teachers, and entrepreneurs. Anti-immigrant discourse declined with an improving economic situation by 1999, even though the number of foreign-born has continued to grow (Jaakkola, 2000). According to Jaakkola (2000), "negative perception towards different-looking representatives of faraway cultures, such as Somalis and the largest immigrant group, Russians, is still alarmingly common" (p.155). According to a survey commissioned by Helsingin Sanomat, more than half of Finns felt that Finland should not increase the number of immigrants (Hiiiraan, 2010).

A nationwide study of Finnish authorities' attitudes towards immigrants in Finland has been conducted by Pitkänen and Kouki (2002). Referring to various other studies (e.g. Alasuutari & Ruuska, 1998; Anttonen, 1997; Pitkänen & Kouki, 1999; Söderling, 1997). Pitkänen and Kouki (2002) suggest that Finnish discourse has been very polarized: immigrants have been viewed either as an opportunity or as a threat. Some have seen the growth in immigration as positive internationalization and cultural diversity, and the immigrants as an economic circulation for the country. Others have mainly perceived foreign-born nationals as a threat (also see Nshom & Croucher, 2014, 2017, 2018; Nshom, 2016): some fear that the Finnish culture is endangered and that economic burden and crime will increase as a result of immigration. The results of their study showed that the attitudes of the authorities varied according to the occupation of these authorities in their encounter with foreign nationals. For example, "the most negative views were expressed by police officers and border guards and the most positive by social workers and Swedish speaking teachers" (Pitkänen & Kouki, 2002, pp. 106). However, Public Broadcaster Yle reported in 2012 that Finns' attitudes towards immigrants soften, referring to the study

carried out by EVA. The EVA pro-market think tank surveyed 1271 people and found that only one in three Finns think that the immigration process should be simplified to help mitigate the effects of an aging population. Nearly half of all Finns consider immigration to be a culturally enriching phenomenon. Meanwhile, more than 40% of people rejected the idea (Yle, 2012).

There is now a universal consensus that migration is a fundamental right of every human being and that those in need must be helped. In 2015, the Finnish Prime Minister made headlines worldwide, offering his home for refugees arriving in Finland (Reuters, 2015). Despite this and many other plausible host influencer attitudes, immigration is sometimes perceived as problematic for the host society. The commonness of negative perception of immigration also has been flamed by the populist politicians amid the refugee influx in 2015 as well as due to the number of people with an immigrant background who have been involved in some sort of crime, of which its effects have multiplied particularly by media coverages emphasizing the background and many other details of the perpetrator. One common narrative appears in the study by Lapio (2018) which states that: "If we do not do something about it [immigration] now, Finland will not be the same in a year... Arguments like this lead to powerful views and it is believed that this cannot continue." (Lapio, 2018, p.78). We must note that Finnish law and policy encourage all people to live together despite their cultural or ethnic differences. For instance, in 2020, Supreme Court banned the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement in Finland (Cesar, 2020). Tackling racism and discrimination has been taken seriously on many levels now.

### *Integrated threat theory (ITT)*

ITT has been described as "one of the most influential theories describing how local people perceive immigrants" (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016, p. 73). According to ITT, members of the host society often perceive immigrants as a threat. According to Stephan et al., 2009, a threat is experienced "when members of one group perceive that another group wishes to or is in a position to, cause them harm" (p. 43). There are four main types of perceived threat notably: realistic threat (competition over scarce resources), symbolic threat (results from perceived incompatibility in worldviews), intergroup anxiety (outgroup fear), and negative stereotype (Stephan & Stephan, 1996). In the following paragraphs, these different types of perceived threats from immigrants are discussed in greater detail.

#### *Realistic threat*

A realistic threat refers to the perception that immigrants are a threat to the very existence of the local people; a threat to their physical and material well-being and a threat to their political and economic power. Locals often perceive immigrants as a realistic threat because they believe that they must compete with immigrants for scarce resources such as jobs, lands, houses just to name a few. The desire to protect their resources has been considered by González, Verkuyten, Weesie, and Poppe (2008) as the underlying reason why members of the host society often dislike and prejudice immigrants. A realistic threat could also mean that local people perceive immigrants as a health risk or threat to safety (Stephan & Stephan, 1996).

For example, in so many European countries, immigrants are usually perceived as taking away jobs and positions that should have been occupied by locals. In addition, immigrants are usually perceived as a burden to the government and the social welfare system. Muslim immigrants are often perceived as a threat to physical safety because of the tendency to associate Muslims with violence and terrorism. Within the context of this study, if immigrants think that Finns perceive them in the ways discussed above, it may imply that they think Finns perceive them as a realistic threat. Research in Finland particularly among Finnish adolescents suggests that immigrants are perceived as a realistic threat (Nshom & Croucher, 2017). Studies have also indicated that Russian immigrants are perceived as a realistic threat (Nshom & Croucher, 2014, 2018).

#### *Symbolic threat*

Symbolic threat gained its origin from the theories of symbolic and modern racism (Kinder & Sears, 1981). A symbolic threat is a fear that arises because members of the host society perceive immigrants as different from them in their values, culture, language, religion, morals, worldview, and way of life (Stephan & Stephan, 1996). The underlying fear assumes that the ingroup's system of meaning could be negatively impacted or destroyed by the outgroup (Stephan et al., 2009). Immigrants in Europe are often perceived as a symbolic threat because of the differences in their values and culture. Research has found that Muslim immigrants in Europe are often perceived as a symbolic threat because of their religion Islam which is considered different from that of majority Christian Europe (Croucher, 2013). Within the context of this study, if immigrants think that Finns think they are a threat to Finnish values, morals, values, and way of life, it implies they think Finns perceive them as a symbolic threat.

#### *Negative stereotype*

This refers to the fear that members of the host society may experience because of the negative stereotypical perceptions they have about immigrants. Because of these negative stereotypical perceptions that they have about immigrants, they may expect the content of these stereotypical perceptions to befall them (Stephan & Stephan, 1996). For example, if members of the host society think that immigrants are violent, rapists, dishonest, lazy, exploitative, or whatever negative stereotypical perception you can think about, when interacting with immigrants, they will expect to experience the consequences of these stereotypical perceptions. Immigrants in Finland are often perceived as dishonest and exploitative. Studies suggest that older and younger Finns have negative stereotypes about Russian immigrants, and these negative stereotypes are related to negative attitudes towards Russian immigrants (Nshom & Croucher, 2014; Nshom, 2016). In addition, studies in Finland have also shown that Finnish early, middle and late adolescents have negative

stereotypes about immigrants living in Finland (Nshom & Croucher, 2017). Within the context of this study, the extent to which immigrants think Finns negatively stereotype is explored.

### *Intergroup anxiety*

Intergroup anxiety originates from the work of Stephan and Stephan (1985). When local people have a fear of immigrants, they tend to feel anxious during interactions with immigrants. According to Stephan and Stephan (1996), intergroup anxiety tends to be salient when there exists a history of conflict between the ingroup and the outgroup when there is limited prior intergroup contact when ingroup members are ethnocentric and ignorant of one another, and perceive the outgroup as dissimilar.

In this study, intergroup anxiety was excluded. The rationale for this is that intergroup anxiety has been considered an individual-level threat (Croucher, 2013; Stephan et al., 2016), and in this study, we are focusing only on group-level threats. Besides, the decision to exclude intergroup anxiety follows the footsteps of several other scholars in the field (e.g. Nshom, 2016; Nshom & Croucher, 2014, 2017, 2018). In the latest version of ITT, intergroup anxiety is not considered a perceived threat but a subset of realistic threat because it concerns apprehensions about interacting with outgroups (Stephan et al., 2016).

In addition, in the revised version of ITT, (see Stephan & Renfro, 2002; Stephan et al., 2009, 2016) negative stereotype is reconceptualized as a subset of realistic threat and a subset of symbolic threat. According to Stephan et al. (2016), "when the negative stereotypes concern the potential for actual harm to the ingroup (e.g., aggressiveness, deviousness), they may be thought of as realistic threats" (p. 7). In addition, "when they concern the potential to undermine the values and beliefs of the ingroup (e.g., immorality, social deviance), they may be considered to be symbolic threats" (p. 7). This implies that in the revised model, there are essentially two types of perceived threats that are realistic threat and symbolic threat even though a distinction is also made between group threats and individual threats (Stephan et al., 2016). For this reason, we only focus on realistic threat and symbolic threat. In this study, we analyze the extent to which immigrants think they are perceived as a realistic threat and a symbolic threat in Finland.

### *Threat benefit model (TBM)*

A major weakness of ITT is that it focuses only on the negative aspects of immigrant perception, that is the perception of threat. Indeed, immigrants are often perceived as a threat by members of the host society (see Nshom, 2016; Nshom & Croucher, 2014, 2017, 2018; Nshom & Arzamastseva, 2020; Nshom, Tovivich & Sadaf, 2020; Scheibner & Morrison, 2009; Stephan & Stephan, 1996, 2000). However, studies also suggest that locals can perceive immigrants as a benefit, and a positive contribution to the local society (e.g. Brylka, Mahonen, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2015; González et al., 2008; Mähönen, Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind & Finell, 2011; Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016, 2020). Therefore, we agree with Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016) that a comprehensive approach to understanding the attitudes of local people toward immigrants, as well as immigrants' perceptions of these attitudes should include positive aspects of the way immigrants are perceived alongside their perception as a threat. Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016) in their theoretical model tagged threat benefit model (TBM), argue that attitudes towards immigrants do not only consist of perceiving immigrants as threatening but also as beneficial to the host society, and that appraisal of an immigrant group can influence the preferred immigration policy towards that immigrant group. According to TBM, there are four types of perceived threats. This includes physical threats, economic threats, threats to social cohesion, and threats to modernity. Moreover, there are four perceived benefits. These include physical benefits, economic benefits, cultural diversity benefits, and humanitarian benefits. Physical threats and economic threats correspond to Stephan and Stephan's (1996, 2000) realistic threat while threats to social cohesion and threats to modernity correspond to symbolic threat. On the other hand, physical benefits and economic benefits are referred to as realistic benefits while cultural diversity benefits and humanitarian benefits are referred to as symbolic benefits. Clearly, one of the ways TBM advances ITT is by considering both perceived threats and perceived benefits in immigrant perceptions. Several studies have tested the threat benefit model and have obtained significant results. For instance, in a sample of 283 social workers in Israel, Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016) found that asylum seekers were perceived both as a threat and a benefit to the receiving society. In addition, this perception mediated the connections between aspects such as personal preferences for values of universalism, power, social security, etc. TBM has also been used to study the appraisal of different immigrant groups (diaspora immigrants from the Former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and western countries (the US, UK, and France) and asylum seekers) in different domains in Israel (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2020).

### *Research question*

Guided by ITT and TBM, this current study focuses on perceived threat (realistic threat and symbolic threat) and perceived benefit (realistic benefit and symbolic benefit). However, this study does not focus on how members of the host society perceive immigrants but on immigrants' perceptions of how they are perceived by the local Finnish population. There is already an abundance of research on how majority groups perceive immigrants using ITT and TBM (Nshom & Croucher, 2018; Riek et al., 2006 for a review; Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016, 2020), but we have not come across any empirical study that has considered immigrant perceptions of how they are perceived in their receiving society based on their lived experiences. To better understand Finnish-immigrant relations, we believe that research should not only focus on how Finns perceive immigrants. Research should additionally explore the perceptions of immigrants themselves about how Finns tend to perceive them based on their lived experiences. To explore this phenomenon, the following research question is posed:

**RQ1.** : What are immigrants' perceptions of how they are perceived in Finland?

## Method

### Qualitative survey

According to Groves, Fowler, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer, and Tourangeau (2004), a survey is “a systematic method for gathering information from (a sample of) entities for the purpose of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members.” (p.4). As rightly noted by Jansen (2010), this definition only refers to quantitative studies that primarily describe the numerical distribution of variables in a population. A qualitative survey, on the other hand, does not aim to establish the means and numerical distributions of variables. It aims to determine the variation and diversity of a topic of interest in a population (Jansen, 2010). One major difference between quantitative surveys and qualitative surveys is that quantitative surveys utilize fixed response alternatives while qualitative surveys utilize open-ended questions where participants can write their answers in a blank space (Niedomysl & Malmberg, 2009). While closed-ended questions do have its advantages such as being fast, relatively straightforward, and easy to analyze, it also has its disadvantages. For example, closed-ended questions are often criticized for being based on vague anecdotal evidence (Niedomysl & Malmberg, 2009). On the other hand, open-ended questions provided an opportunity to gauge participants’ thoughts and feelings. Open-ended questions represent an opportunity for participants to express their thoughts in their own words. In the words of Swart (2019):

“Surveying with open-ended questions can offer the researcher rich, unconstrained participant responses to broad questions. Open-ended questions allow participants to express their perspective using their language, terms, and expressions... Open-ended questions, therefore, provide participants the freedom to respond as they think appropriate, enabling them to determine their answers and use their own words, potentially encouraging them to share more personal and genuine perspectives.” (p. 2)

Stoneman, Sturgis and Allum (2013) insist that open-ended questions are more likely to provide a fuller and more heterogeneous set of perspectives than closed-ended questions and that the quantity of information the researcher is likely to have from the respondents about their position regarding an issue through open-ended questions is considerably greater than what can be afforded by closed-ended questions.

Despite these benefits, open-ended surveys are scarcely used even though they have been recommended for more than 2 decades (Riiskjær, Ammentorp & Kofoed, 2012). Some of the concerns that have been advanced about open-ended surveys include, for example, the fact that it favors participants who are educated and highly articulate in writing over those who are not (Stoneman, Sturgis & Allum, 2013). In addition, open-ended questions as a valid research instrument have been criticized because of concerns with coder variability (Niedomysl & Malmberg, 2009). In addition, it is more time and energy-consuming to analyze responses from open-ended questions, and it is impossible to ask follow-up questions to improve understanding (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). In a nutshell, both open-ended and closed-ended questions have their disadvantages and advantages.

### Content analysis

According to (Jackson & Trochim, 2002), the starting point for methodological considerations for analyzing free-flowing text such as open-ended survey responses is the distinction between word-based and code-based methodologies. Word-based methodologies consider words as units of analysis while code-based methodologies consider codes as units of analysis. An example of a code-based methodology is content analysis. Open-ended questions are used to gather qualitative data, and according to Chambers and Chiang (2012), content analysis is a standard method for studying responses to open-ended survey questions. A “Content analysis is a process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data” (Patton, 1990, p. 381). According to Chambers and Chiang (2012), this process enables us to identify the characteristics of the message. A content analysis enables us to make clear links between theory and the data under examination so that we can draw conclusions across the population. In the words of Jackson and Trochim (2002, p. 310), “content analysis seeks to test theory with pre-established themes”. Consequently, a content analysis of the open-ended responses in this study was necessary to gain an understanding of participants’ thoughts and feelings through the lens of the integrated threat theory of prejudice (ITT) and the threat benefit model (TBM).

### Procedure and participants

The data for this study was collected among immigrants living in Finland through an online anonymous open-ended questionnaire distributed on social media. Participants were asked how in their opinion immigrants are perceived in Finland. The questionnaire also had demographic questions such as age, gender, nationality, level of education, residency status, and length of stay in Finland. All institutional and ethical clearances were obtained before the data collection process. It was made clear to the participants that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and anonymous and they were not compensated for their participation.

In total, 103 immigrants from 41 countries participated in the study. Asylum seekers and refugees were not part of the study. 25.2% had a student status, 29% had a work permit, 31% had a permanent residence, 14.6% had acquired Finnish citizenship. All participants had been living in Finland for at least a year. The mean 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. Out of the (n = 103), 38% were men while 61% were women. Participants’ age ranged from 18 to 58 (M = 33.4, SD = 7.39).

Because the number of participants was small and manageable, manual coding was chosen over computer-assisted coding.



According to Chambers and Chiang (2012) the reliability of open-ended survey analysis can be discussed in the following two terms: (1) intra-rater reliability: can the same coder get the same results try after try? and, (2) inter-rater reliability: do coding schemes lead to the same text being coded in the same category by different people? (p. 1116). To establish inter-rater reliability, the data was coded by a pair of two authors and recorded by another pair of two authors to ensure that the coding was accurate. Cohen's  $\kappa$  was run to determine if there was agreement between two pairs of coders. The results indicated that there was an almost perfect agreement between the two pairs of coders (see Landis & Koch, 1977),  $\kappa = 0.90$  (95% CI, .727 to .951),  $p < .0001$ .

## Results

This study examined immigrants' perception of how Finns (host society) tend to perceive them. The major focus was on perceived threats (realistic threat and symbolic threat) conceptualized as negative perceptions and perceived benefits (realistic benefit and symbolic benefit) also conceptualized as positive perceptions. These categories were derived from ITT and TBM which are suitable theoretical frameworks on how immigrants are perceived. Not all responses fitted under the different types of threats and benefits according to ITT and TBM respectively. For example, some responses indicated that immigrants believed they were perceived as a threat without a clear distinction of whether it was a realistic threat or symbolic threat. These responses were categorized as a general threat. On the other hand, responses that indicated that immigrants believed they were perceived as a benefit without a clear distinction of whether it was a realistic benefit, or a symbolic benefit were categorized as a general benefit. Responses that neither communicated a perceived threat or perceived gain were categorized as neutral. Table 1 illustrates the definition and meaning of each category label according to ITT and TBM, and a sample response for each category.

The total number of respondents considered and retained was 100, out of which few respondents expressed multiple views. The different views were separated and linked to the appropriate category they belonged to above. This increased the total number of responses to 113. Table 2 illustrates the number of responses and percentages under each category label.

According to the data, in total, immigrant's perception of how Finns tend to perceive them is predominantly negative. This implies that according to immigrants, Finns tend to perceive them mostly as a threat. According to the data, (59%) of responses indicate that immigrants feel Finns perceive them as a threat while (26%) of the data showed that immigrants feel Finns tend to perceive them as a benefit to the Finnish society. A two-by-one contingency table approach through the non-parametric utility was used to test for the statistical significance of the difference between the two percentages (perceived threat/negative (59%) and perceived benefit/positive (26%)). The Chi-Square test revealed that the difference between the two percentages was significant  $\chi^2 (1, N = 96) = 15.04$ ,  $p = .0001$ . Out of the (59%) of responses that indicated that immigrants think Finns tend to perceive immigrants as a threat, (37%) represented realistic threat perceptions, (10%) represented symbolic threat perceptions, and (12%) represented general threat perceptions. Out of the (26%) of responses that indicate that immigrants think Finns perceive immigrants as a benefit, (9%) represented realistic benefit perceptions, (13%) represented symbolic benefit perceptions, and (4%) represented general benefit perceptions. These

**Table 1**  
Category label, definition, and sample responses.

Category label	Category criteria/ meaning/definition	Sample response
Perceived threat/ negative perceptions	Includes realistic threat, symbolic threat, and general threat.	Responses for realistic threat, symbolic threat, and general threat.
Realistic threat	Refers to a threat to the very existence of the ingroup (Finns). This includes threats to the physical and mental wellbeing of the ingroup along with threats to the political and economic power of the ingroup.	"Immigrants are perceived as people who want to ruin the economy because they use Kela while in reality, most immigrants work".
Symbolic threat	Refers to the perception of immigrants as "different" from members of the host society in terms of their culture, values, norms, culture, religion, way of life, etc.	"Immigrants, especially Arabic origin are perceived as a threat to system or culture. Most probably due to Recent wave of terror activities around the world".
Perceived benefit/ positive perceptions	Includes realistic benefit, symbolic benefit, and general benefit.	Responses for realistic benefit, symbolic benefit, and general benefit.
Realistic benefit	Refers to the perception that immigrants are a positive contribution to the economic, physical, and political life of the ingroup or host society	"I think immigrants are seen as help to develop Finland".
Symbolic benefit	Refers to the perception or recognition that immigrants are a cultural enrichment to diversity and the Finnish society.	"Finland is the one of the great places to be accepted as a part of the nation Immigrants are warmly welcome and are treated with the same rights as a Finn".
General threat	Responses that indicated immigrants believed they were perceived as a threat without a clear distinction of whether it was a realistic threat or symbolic threat.	"Unfortunately, immigrants are still perceived in a negative way".
General benefit	Responses that indicated that immigrants believed they were perceived as a benefit without a clear distinction of whether it was a realistic benefit or a symbolic benefit	"I personally think that Finns have a positive attitude towards immigrants on the general level".
Neutral	Responses that neither communicated a perceived threat nor perceived	"Random guys on street. Perhaps just like how people usually perceive each other in a cold and advanced post capitalist society".

**Table 2**  
Number of responses and percentages under each category label.

Coding Scheme for Categorizing Responses		
Categories	Number of responses (113)	Percentage %
Realistic threat	42	37%
Realistic benefit	10	9%
Symbolic threat	11	10%
Symbolic benefit	15	13%
Neutral	17	15%
General threat	14	12%
General benefit	4	4%

results indicate that among the different category labels (realistic threat, symbolic threat, realistic benefit, symbolic benefit, general threat, general benefit, and neutral) in this study, realistic threat is the most dominant perception immigrants have of how Finns tend to perceive immigrants in Finland.

## Discussion

This study debuted intending to understand immigrants' perceptions of how Finns tend to perceive them. The data was analyzed through the lens of the integrated threat theory of prejudice (Stephan et al., 2002, 2009) which stipulates that locals often perceive immigrants as a realistic threat and a symbolic threat, and the threat benefit model which argues that in addition to realistic threat and symbolic threat, immigrants can also be perceived by locals as a realistic benefit and a symbolic benefit. It is important to note that even though there is an abundance of research on how locals such as Finns perceive immigrants (for example, Nshom & Croucher, 2017), this is the first study to the best of our knowledge that considers immigrants' perceptions of how locals tend to perceive them based on their lived experiences.

There are two major findings worth highlighting from this study. First, the data revealed that immigrants think the perception of Finns towards them is predominantly negative. This implies that they think that Finns perceive them predominantly as a threat to the Finnish society. This finding is not surprising. This finding is in line with several studies in Finland that suggest that Finns perceive immigrants predominantly as a threat. For example, in their study, Nshom and Croucher (2017) utilized ITT to understand the extent to which Finns perceive immigrants as a threat and found evidence for the fact that Finns perceive immigrants as a threat. In addition, they found that the perception of immigrants as a threat was related to negative attitudes towards immigrants. Some other studies in Finland have also found evidence that Finns tend to perceive specific immigrant groups as a threat. For example, in their study, Nshom and Croucher (2014) found that Finnish adolescents and elderly Finns perceived Russian immigrants as a threat to Finnish society. Croucher et al. (2013) found that Finns perceived Muslim immigrants as a threat. Studies in other parts of the world have also found that majority groups often perceive immigrants as a threat in several contexts (e.g. Nshom & Arzamastseva, 2020; Stephan et al., 1999). The findings of this study do align with these previous studies that confirm that Finns do perceive immigrants predominantly as a threat. Immigrants do believe based on their experiences and impressions that Finns do perceive them as a threat. This understanding points to the need for future studies that attempt to understand the statistical difference between the perception immigrants have of how Finns tend to perceive them and the actual perceptions of Finns towards immigrants. Understanding the discrepancy between the two will further our understanding of Finnish-immigrant intergroup relations.

The second finding worth highlighting from this study is that among the different types of perceived threats, immigrants believe Finns predominantly perceive them as a realistic threat. A realistic refers to a threat to the very existence of the ingroup (Finns). This includes threats to the physical and mental wellbeing of the ingroup along with threats to the political and economic power of the ingroup. This finding is also not surprising as the populist discourse in Finland has often focused on the perception of immigrants as a realistic threat to the economy. For example, immigrants are often blamed for taking jobs from the locals. Immigrants are also perceived as people who take advantage of the social welfare system (Kela). Immigrants are often stereotyped as lazy, dangerous, rapists, etc. This finding also aligns with the self-reports of locals in Finland about the dominant way in which they perceive immigrants. For example, in their study, Nshom and Croucher (2018) and Nshom (2016) also found realistic threats to be the most dominant way Finns tend to perceive Russian immigrants living in Finland and realistic threat is a significant predictor of negative attitudes towards immigrants in Finland (Nshom & Croucher, 2017). Even though we do not test the statistical significance of the difference between immigrant perceptions of how Finns tend to perceive them and the actual perceptions Finns have of immigrants, this study at least suggests that the perception and experiences of immigrants about the dominant way Finns tend to perceive them align with previous self-reports of Finns about the dominant way they perceive immigrants.

In some ways, these findings reflect the sociopolitical and immigration climate in Finland. Recent analyses suggest that far-right political ideology has gained significant influence in Finland within the past decade (Criss, 2020). In fact, in the last legislative elections in Finland, Finland's far-right political party (the Finns Party) emerged second with 17.5% of the total vote while the Social Democratic Party emerged first with 17.7% of the vote. Many were shocked in Finland and abroad by the slight difference between the two parties as it indicated that Finland's anti-immigrant party was gaining increasing popularity among Finns. Recent polls suggest that Finland's right-wing party is currently the most popular political party in Finland (see *Helsinki Times*, 2019). The party is known for its anti-immigrant/immigration rhetoric and for propagating a discourse that often represents immigrants as a threat to Finnish



society rather than a gain or benefit. According to its 2015 parliamentary election campaign pamphlet, it views immigration as follows:

Immigration will change, irreversibly, the host country's population profile, disrupt social cohesion, overburden public services and economic resources, lead to the formation of ghettos, promote religious radicalism and its consequences, and foster ethnic conflicts. [...] It can still be possible to avoid the immigration disasters of Sweden, France, and the United Kingdom but it will require a determined policy and clear legislation (Source: [The Finns Party's Immigration Policy, 2015](#)).

In its 2019 parliamentary election slogan, immigrants were described as invaders and opportunists. Thus, within the Finnish context, the perception of immigrants as a realistic threat and a symbolic threat has been largely promoted by the rhetoric of Finland's far-right party (Finn's Party). Just like [Rydgren \(2008, p. 739\)](#), asserts, such parties usually present immigrants as: (1) a threat to the national identity (2) a major cause of criminality and social unrest (3) a cause of unemployment (4) abusers of the welfare state. Many Finns who are afraid of social and economic changes in society tend to adhere to such messages that represent immigrants as a threat to the host society ([Criss, 2020](#)). It is therefore not surprising that support for the Finns party has significantly increased, that Finns tend to perceive immigrants as a threat (Nshom, 2017), and that immigrants also feel that based on their lived experiences they are often perceived more as a threat rather than a benefit to the Finnish society.

In addition, the refugee crisis of 2015 led to an unprecedented influx of immigrants into Finland and this led to fear and anxiety among some Finns. Attitudes towards immigrants among Finns were sparse. Some Finns took to the streets to protest the influx of immigrants while others took to the streets to advocate in favor of the influx of immigrants. Some Finns perceived immigrants/immigration as a threat while some perceived it as a benefit. Recent polls in Finland suggest that attitudes towards immigrants and immigration have become more positive ([Yle, 2012](#)). However, this study shows that the perception immigrants have of such attitudes is still predominantly negative. This current study indicates that immigrants believe among the different types of threats; they are perceived more as a realistic threat. This idea can also be associated with the kind of images the media paints about immigrants. The media often paints immigrants more as a threat rather than a benefit. In addition, the media often paints immigrants more as a threat to Finns' physical and material wellbeing. This is especially true for immigrants from Arabic and African countries. The salience of realistic threat could also be reflective of the economic wellbeing of the country. Realistic threats are often more salient in times of economic hardship and people tend to express their economic fears more in times of economic hardship. If realistic threat is more salient, outgroups will be more likely to perceive realistic threat as the perception of the ingroup towards the outgroup.

However, it is important to note that immigrants may develop their perceptions about how Finns tend to perceive them from different sources. Some of these include: From direct and indirect intergroup contact experiences with Finns, the media, and narratives of other immigrants just to name a few. All these aspects represent opportunities for further research. It would be advantageous to explore the sources of these perceptions among immigrants. For example, studies could investigate the role of intergroup contact experiences with Finns as a predictor of these perceptions. For instance, based on the intergroup contact theory (see [Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008](#) for a review), it can be expected that positive contact experiences with Finns will lead to more positive perceptions of Finnish attitudes toward immigrants and negative contact experiences will lead to negative perceptions of how Finns tend to perceive immigrants. Currently, there are no studies that have attempted to test these phenomena.

Future research should consider testing for the statistical significance of the difference between immigrant perceptions of how Finns tend to perceive them, and the actual perceptions Finns have of immigrants. Further research should equally consider the potential effect of immigrants' perception of how majority groups perceive them on their psychological well-being, their socio-economic adjustment, and acculturation process in the host society. It can be expected, for example, that if immigrants think they are perceived as a symbolic threat, they will be more likely to choose to assimilate into the host society rather than integrate, or if immigrants think they are perceived as a realistic threat, they may be more likely to experience feelings of anxiety and loneliness. Currently, such studies are non-existent to the best of our knowledge. Studies can also investigate how the perceptions immigrants have of the way locals tend to perceive immigrants explain how they feel towards locals. Studies that adopt this perspective are hard to come across. In addition, we recommend that future research consider the potential effect of age, gender, level of education, nationality, length of stay in Finland, and immigration status and any other important factor on the perception immigrants have about the way Finns tend to perceive them. This will throw more light on the factors that are important to these perceptions. In addition, we recommend that future research consider examining refugees' perceptions as well about how Finns tend to perceive them. This study did not include refugees, but we recognize that they are an important immigrant group. Lastly, we recommend that future research should consider exploring this subject using in-depth interviews and quantitative surveys. Utilizing diverse methodological perspectives will provide an opportunity for us to have access to different levels of analysis and understanding of the perception immigrants have of the way Finns perceive them.

### Limitations

Even though this study has contributed significantly to a better understanding of Finnish-immigrant relations, it is not without its limitations. First, this study utilized a qualitative survey as an instrument of data collection. Even though qualitative surveys provide an opportunity for participants to express their thoughts as they wish, and we did not have any difficulty interpreting the data, we do agree with [Jackson and Trochim \(2002\)](#) that qualitative surveys do not provide an opportunity to ask clarifying questions to improve understanding. In addition, qualitative surveys favor participants who are educated and highly articulate in writing over those who are not ([Stoneman et al., 2013](#)). This might have possibly contributed to the highly educated sample obtained for this study. In addition, even though all participants were immigrants, it is important to note that not all types of immigrants were included in this study. For example, refugees were not included in this study. We, therefore, advise that generalizations of the findings to all immigrants should be

made with care. Moreover, the sample size was small even though it represented a broad range of different immigrant groups living in Finland. As a result, we recommend that generalizations be made with caution and future studies should consider larger samples.

## Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study has several strengths. It contributes significantly to our understanding of the perception of immigrants on how Finns tend to perceive them. This study indicates that according to immigrants, Finns predominantly perceive them as a threat and not a benefit to the Finnish society. In addition, among the different types of threats, immigrants believe they are predominantly perceived as a realistic threat in Finland. Theoretically, this study adds to ITT and TBM by suggesting that immigrants may not only be perceived as a realistic threat, symbolic threat, realistic benefit, and a symbolic benefit. Some perceptions towards immigrants can also be neutral or without distinction. As intergroup relations are vital for inclusive and diverse societies like Finland, this type of study is imperative.

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