

# Exploring the intergroup consequences of majority members' perceptions that minority members want majority members to adopt the minority culture

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There remains an obvious gap in the acculturation literature, which relates to cultural change associated with the majority/dominant group. This paper explores how majority members react to a perceived expectation from minority members that *majority members* should undergo cultural change. A study was conducted exploring how majority members' perceptions of a demand by minority members that the majority should adopt the minority culture affects the majority members' preferences for minority acculturation, and whether effects are mediated by perceptions of symbolic threat. Two hundred sixty-six participants who self-reported being white British completed an online survey. A model was hypothesized whereby a perception that minority members demand that the majority takes on the minority culture predicted perceived symbolic threat, which was in turn negatively associated with a desire that minority members should maintain the minority culture, and positively with a desire that minority members should adopt the majority culture. Results supported the hypothesized model, with all individual paths and indirect effects significant in the hypothesized directions. Symbolic threat mediated the effect of perceived demand for minority culture adoption on majority preferences for minority acculturation. Findings are discussed in relation to implications for intergroup relations in culturally plural societies.

**Keywords:** Acculturation; Culture change; Symbolic threat; Culture maintenance; Culture adoption.

Due to global migration, many societies are now multicultural. It is important to consider the implications of such cultural change, and the consequences for how different groups interact. The psychology of acculturation and intergroup relations can provide a useful framework to understand the barriers in establishing a harmonious multicultural society, and the antecedents of particular attitudes which may create such barriers. This study follows previous acculturation research (López-Rodríguez et al., 2014; Zagefka et al., 2012) by testing antecedents of majority members' acculturation preferences. In particular, this paper investigates how majority members might react when they perceive that minority members want majority members to adopt the minority culture.

People who migrate to another country undergo a process of change and adaptation labelled acculturation, while members of the majority society also adapt to the changes in society (Redfield et al., 1936). According to Berry (1997), two fundamental dimensions underlie the acculturation process. These are the desire for heritage culture maintenance and the desire for intergroup contact. In subsequent models, the dimension "desire for culture adoption" was preferred to "desire for intergroup contact" (Bourhis et al., 1997). These dimensions can combine to make up four acculturation strategies which detail how minority members adapt to the majority society, but also how majority members want minority members to adapt (Bourhis et al., 1997). The four strategies are

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(a) integration, where there is a preference for heritage culture maintenance and majority culture adoption; (b) assimilation, where there is a preference for majority culture adoption but no heritage culture maintenance; (c) separation (from the perspective of the minority group)/segregation (from the perspective of the majority group), where there is a preference for heritage culture maintenance but no majority culture adoption; and finally (d) marginalisation (from the perspective of the minority group)/exclusion (from the perspective of the majority group), where this is no preference for either heritage culture maintenance or majority culture adoption. It has been consistently shown that integration has the best adaptation outcomes for minority members (Berry, 1997; Berry et al., 2006).

### Acculturation and intergroup relations

Importantly, acculturation is central to intergroup relations (Brown & Zagefka, 2011). The social identity perspective suggests that members of dominant and non-dominant groups are likely to behave in ways to preserve the best interests of their groups, enhance collective self-esteem, and seek positive distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In cases where group members perceive threat or discrimination to their group or identity, they are likely to show compensatory responses, for example, increased in-group identification (Branscombe et al., 1999). Related to acculturation, then, minority and majority members are likely to hold acculturation preferences that they perceive to be best suited to serve the interests of their group. Accordingly, minority members are more likely to prefer multiculturalism as it allows them to maintain and protect their heritage culture, while also obtaining a higher social status in society (Verkuyten, 2007). In contrast, majority members may see any form of minority culture maintenance as a threat to the status and dominance of the majority group, and therefore endorse assimilation strategies as a way of alleviating such threat (Verkuyten, 2007). This is supported by studies across Europe showing that minority members generally prefer integration (Berry et al., 2006), while majority members prefer that minority members assimilate to the majority culture (Van Oudenhoven et al., 1998).

Furthermore, researchers have argued that acculturation preferences are not independent of each other and should be studied as a dynamic intergroup process (Bourhis et al., 1997; Brown & Zagefka, 2011). In their model of acculturation, Bourhis et al. (1997) argue that how well acculturation orientations “fit” together has consequences for the relations between those groups. If minority members strive for culture maintenance, but majority members seek majority culture adoption only, “problematic” or “conflictual” intergroup relations are

likely (Bourhis et al., 1997). Therefore, it is not just the in-groups’ own preferences that are important to consider, but also the *perceptions* of outgroup acculturation preferences. Majority members tend to evaluate minority members who seek to maintain their heritage culture more negatively (Van Oudenhoven et al., 1998). In addition, some studies have shown that perceptions of minority acculturation preferences can impact majority members’ own acculturation preferences and support for multiculturalism (Tip et al., 2012; Zagefka et al., 2012).

### Mediating role of symbolic threat

When studying why perceptions of particular acculturation attitudes can foster negative reactions in majority members, the integrated threat theory is helpful (Stephan et al., 1998). According to this framework, negative attitudes towards an outgroup stem from various types of threat. One such threat, symbolic threat, relates to a perception from in-group members that their system of values, morals, and beliefs are being undermined by a particular outgroup. Of course, as a result of mass immigration and globalisation, many societies now comprise many groups with a plethora of different value systems. Ethnic and cultural groups with different worldviews to the dominant majority may be seen as a threat to the majority’s way of life and cultural identity, leading to negative attitudes and prejudice towards the minority outgroup. Studies have shown that perceived threats to in-group values by immigrants and minorities are related to more negative attitudes towards these groups (Stephan et al., 1998; Velasco González et al., 2008).

Because certain acculturation orientations suggest a strong commitment by minority members to their distinct cultural values, norms, and cultural practices, they can result in perceived threat. In line with this, Tip et al. (2012) found that when majority members perceived higher levels of culture maintenance, they showed less support for multiculturalism and the effect was mediated by perceived identity threat. In addition, a perception that minority members desire contact with majority members, or wish to adopt the majority culture, was positively related to support for multiculturalism, and these effects were also mediated by perceived identity threat. As well as when majority members perceive that minority members do not seek intergroup contact, they show more negative intergroup attitudes, and this effect was again found to be mediated by symbolic threat (Matera et al., 2015). Finally, López-Rodríguez et al. (2014) studied majority members’ acculturation preferences and showed that a perception that minority members adopt the majority culture leads to more positive stereotypes about minority members, which in turn reduces perceived threat. Perceived threat, in turn, was shown to be associated positively with preference for minority members to adopt the majority culture and negatively with a preference for minority members to maintain

their heritage culture. In sum, the above findings show that perceptions of particular acculturation orientations can elicit particular responses in majority members, due to perceptions of symbolic threat.

### Majority culture change

As highlighted, studies have attempted to model and explore minority acculturation orientations and how these orientations impact intergroup relations (Brown & Zagefka, 2011). However, there remains an obvious gap in the acculturation literature which relates to cultural change associated with the majority/dominant group. Much of the focus has been on minority groups: how they acculturate in the dominant society and how majority members may want them to act. Going forward, an important question to address relates to the extent to which *majority members* perceive or go through culture change *themselves* and how this may impact intergroup relations. Redfield et al.'s (1936) classic definition of acculturation very clearly highlights cultural change in *both* groups that come into contact with one another. It is surprising, then, that this bidirectional aspect has been almost entirely overlooked in the decades of acculturation research that have bloomed since then. It is therefore an urgent matter for further investigation to address this gap in research and study potential culture change within the majority group.

To our knowledge, only few studies have explored opinions regarding culture change of the majority group (e.g., see Haugen & Kunst, 2017; Lefringhausen & Marshall, 2016, for some examples). One study showed evidence that majority culture change is also underpinned by the same two acculturation dimensions: a desire for majority culture maintenance and a desire for immigrant culture adoption (Haugen & Kunst, 2017). However, these studies reviewed above investigated majority members' ideas and attitudes about culture change in the majority group. In this contribution, what will be highlighted is not actual culture change or culture change that the majority group themselves wish to undergo, but *perceptions* by majority members that minority members want the majority culture to change. In particular, this study explores the dimension of perceived demand for minority culture adoption from the point of view of majority members. It is important to distinguish between this variable and symbolic threat. These are conceptually independent variables. The former pertains to the metacognitions of acculturation preferences regarding the majority culture, whereas the latter directly addresses whether ethnic minorities are seen as a threat to the majority group.

Relevant to this is research on cultural change through a "culture inertia" lens. This research suggests that individuals seek stability in their identity and cultures and will react with resistance to change or perceived change (Zárate et al., 2012). For members of majority groups, assimilation of the minority implies that majority

members will be able to maintain their norms, values and customs without the need to change in order to accommodate other groups. Any perception from majority groups that culture change is occurring may lead to intergroup prejudice (Zárate et al., 2012). Moreover, fears that minority groups aim to change the essential character of a certain homeland are frequently stoked by right wing political groupings and some media outlets. An example of this is a fear that certain groups aim to build a "state within a state" (e.g., by answering to Sharia law rather than national law) with the goal of eventually imposing those rules on the majority group also (Hall, 2016). Beliefs in majority members that minority members demand culture change from majority members have not been studied, and the present research will therefore address this important gap.

It is worth noting that in this study, the term minority member encompasses both immigrants and citizens from an ethnic minority background. Although it is important to distinguish between the two, we sought to explore intergroup relations with majority members by considering both minority groups as non-dominant groups in the UK, compared to white British majority members. This is because research on the acculturation framework has also been applied to indigenous minority groups, as well as immigrants (see Brown & Zagefka, 2011 for a review). Also, second generation immigrants may still perceive discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity (Fernández-Reino, 2020).

Overall, this present study explores how perceptions of a demand by minority members that the majority should pursue minority culture adoption will be associated with majority members' perceptions of threat and own acculturation preferences. Based on the literature reviewed above, it was hypothesized that a perception by majority members that minority members demand that the majority should adopt the minority culture would lead to perceived symbolic identity threat. In turn, perceived threat was expected to decrease support for the idea that the minority group should maintain their original culture, and it should increase demands that the minority group should adopt the majority culture. A path model was hypothesized where perceived demand for majority members to adopt the minority culture predicts greater symbolic threat among majority participants, which in turn predicts greater desire for minority members to adopt the majority culture, and less desire that minority members maintain their heritage culture.

The processes described above are expected to be generic, but in this investigation we tested them in the British cultural context. About 14% of the UK population is foreign born, with additional sections of the population being 2nd generation immigrants who were born in the UK but whose parents hail from elsewhere (Vargas-Silva & Rienzo, 2020). In 2019, the three biggest minority groups living in the UK were from

India, Poland, and Pakistan, respectively (Vargas-Silva & Rienzo, 2020). There has been much discussion on the issue of immigration and discrimination of minority members (Fernández-Reino, 2020). Therefore, there is an increasing need to further understand the nature of intergroup relations in the UK.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 186 females and 76 males, recruited online from Prolific.ac ( $N = 266$ ; 4 participants reported their gender as being neither male nor female). Participants were aged from 18 to 75 ( $M = 35.57$ ,  $SD = 13.13$ ). To ensure that participants constituted the ethnic majority group in the UK, pre-screening ensured that all participants included in the study had self-reported their current place of residence, and most time spent before the age of 18, as the UK, and their ethnicity as white British. Participants received £0.50 for their participation. Ethical approval was obtained by the university ethics committee, and all aspects of the research were in line with BPS and APA ethics guidelines. The number of participants was selected based on the recommendation that models with a moderate amount of parameters are typically stable around  $N = 200$  (Kline, 2015).

### Design and materials

This study was a cross-sectional online survey study. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measures used in the current study are highlighted below.

#### ***Perceived demand for majority members to adopt the minority culture***

A number of previous studies on acculturation from an intergroup perspective measured acculturation attitudes in quite general terms (Tip et al., 2012; Zagefka et al., 2012). In an attempt to use a broader and potentially more informative measure, this present study assessed acculturation attitudes in six specific domains: work, education, language, social relations, family life, and values (Navas et al., 2005).

Participants were asked about the extent to which they agree/disagree with the statement “Ethnic minority members living in the UK want us to adopt their culture in the following parts of life ...” and the six domains listed above were presented,  $\alpha = .93$ .

#### ***Symbolic threat***

Symbolic threat was measured based on three items used by Velasco González et al. (2008) adapted to the UK

context. Participants were presented with the following statement “Because of the presence of ethnic minorities in the UK ...” and were asked to report the extent to which they agree/disagree with the following items “British identity is being threatened,” “British norms are being threatened,” and “British culture is being threatened,”  $\alpha = .97$ .

#### ***Majority members’ preferences for minority members to maintain the minority culture***

Participants reported the extent to which they agree/disagree with the statement “I would like ethnic minority members living in the UK to keep their culture of origin in the following parts of life ...” and were presented with six acculturation domains as before,  $\alpha = .89$ .

#### ***Majority members’ preferences for minority members to adopt the majority culture***

For culture adoption preference, the statement read “I would like ethnic minority members living in the UK to take on the British culture in the following parts of life ...” and the same six domains as above were presented,  $\alpha = .85$ .

In addition to the above measures, some demographic questions such as age, gender, and ethnic group (to confirm that the pre-screening was successful) were included. Some other measures were also included but were not the focus of the current study and so will not be mentioned further. The data for the study presented in this paper is available on the OSF platform with this link: <http://bit.ly/3bph8LS>.

## RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of all variables are presented in Table 1.

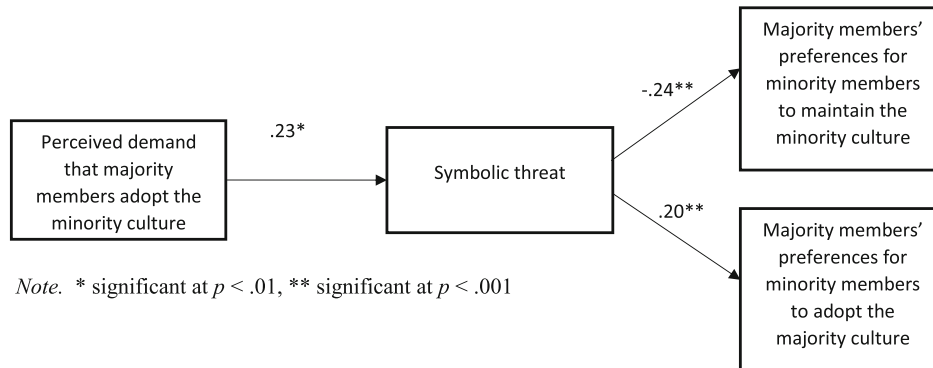
First, principal components analysis with varimax rotation was conducted for perceived demand for majority members to adopt the minority culture adoption, majority members’ preferences for minority members to maintain the minority culture and majority members’ preferences for minority members to adopt the majority culture. The goal was to see if separate factors would emerge for public and private domains, given the suggestion in the literature that this might be an important distinction, and the debate around which spheres belong to each type (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2006; Haugen & Kunst, 2017; Navas et al., 2005). In each of the analyses, only one factor emerged. For “perceived demand for majority members to adopt the minority culture,” the factor had an eigenvalue of 4.43 and explained 73.78% of the variance, and factor loadings ranged from 0.81 to 0.90. For “majority



**TABLE 1**  
Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations across variables

	Means	SD	1	2	3
1. Perceived demand that majority members adopt the minority culture	2.66	0.77	–		
2. Perceived symbolic threat	2.14	1.07	.17**	–	
3. Majority members' preferences for minority members to maintain the minority culture	3.46	0.71	.03	–.37**	–
4. Majority members' preferences for minority members to adopt the majority culture	3.33	0.66	.17**	.33**	–.08

\*Significant at  $p < .05$ , \*\*Significant at  $p < .01$ .



Note. \* significant at  $p < .01$ , \*\* significant at  $p < .001$

**Figure 1.** Path model with unstandardized path coefficients.

members' preferences for minority members to maintain the minority culture," the factor had an eigenvalue of 3.94 and explained 65.63% of the variance, and factor loadings ranged from 0.75 to 0.87. For "majority members' preferences for minority members to adopt the majority culture," the factor had an eigenvalue of 3.50 and explained 58.29% of the variance, and factor loadings ranged from 0.68 to 0.83. These results suggest that attitudes are similar across public and private domains, and hence acculturation indices were calculated averaging across all items, rather than for public and private domains separately.

To test the hypothesized path model, SPSS AMOS 25 was utilised. In the hypothesized model, perceived demand for majority members to adopt the minority culture was specified as a predictor of symbolic threat, which in turn was specified as a predictor of both majority members' preferences for minority members to maintain the minority culture and majority members' preferences for minority members to adopt the majority culture. The hypothesized model provided good fit for the data, as shown by the non-significant chi-squared test,  $\chi^2(3) = 6.74, p = .081$ , and other indices of model fit: RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.95, SRMR = 0.05. Kline (2015) recommends reporting these indices when assessing model fit, with an RMSEA value lower than 0.08, CFI greater than 0.90, and SRMR value lower than 0.08 commonly used as thresholds for model fit (Hooper et al., 2008). All individual paths were significant in the hypothesized directions (Figure 1). Perceived demand for majority members to adopt the minority culture was positively associated with perceived symbolic threat

( $\beta = .23, t = 2.77, p = .006$ , 95% confidence interval [CI] [0.05, 0.43]), and symbolic threat was a significant positive predictor of majority members' preferences for minority members to adopt the majority culture ( $\beta = .20, t = 5.68, p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.14, 0.27]), and a significant negative predictor of majority members' preferences for minority members to maintain the minority culture ( $\beta = -.24, t = -6.49, p < .001$ , 95% CI [-0.32, -0.17]).

The hypothesized indirect effect was tested using 5,000 bootstrapping samples at 95% bias corrected confidence intervals. Perceived demand for majority members to adopt the minority culture had a significant indirect effect on both majority members' preferences for minority members to maintain the minority culture,  $-0.06$ , 95% CI [-0.11, -0.01], and majority members' preferences for minority members to adopt the majority culture,  $0.05$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.10].

## DISCUSSION

This study explored the extent to which majority members perceive that minority members want them to adopt the minority culture, and how this relates to perceptions of symbolic threat, and majority members' own acculturation preferences for minority members. Findings showed that a perception by majority members that minority members demand culture change of the majority group was associated with greater feelings of symbolic threat, and therefore a greater desire that minority members adopt British culture, and less of a desire that minority members maintain their own culture.

These findings add to the existing literature on the relationship between perceived outgroup acculturation preferences and own acculturation preferences (Brown & Zagefka, 2011). In addition, this is the first study to suggest that majority members are impacted not only by how minority members choose to navigate their own cultures, but also by perceptions that minority members want culture change from majority members themselves. These findings can be understood from an intergroup lens, using the social identity and intergroup threat frameworks (Stephan et al., 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Majority members are motivated to defend their identity and maintain dominance in society, and as a result may find multiculturalism a threat to their identity (Verkuyten, 2007). Therefore, any perceptions that minority members seek some sort of majority culture change in the majority society can be considered as a threat to the majority culture. As a result, majority members are likely to react in ways designed to defend their identity, that is, showing a greater desire for majority culture adoption and less minority culture maintenance from minority members, as this study shows.

Of course, a number of limitations of this study must be considered. First, this present study was correlational in nature, and therefore causal inferences cannot be drawn from this study. Future experimental or longitudinal research would represent an important advancement on the current findings. In addition, we did not control for existing levels of prejudice in this present study, and future research in this area should account for this due to the potential relationship between prejudice and majority members' acculturation attitudes (Zagefka et al., 2012).

Another limitation to consider is that this study focused only on the perceived demand for majority members to adopt the minority culture. Future research should consider the parallel dimension of perceived demand for majority members to maintain their national culture to build a more complete picture of the intergroup processes involved when considering culture change from the majority perspective. It may also be of interest to test intergroup contact to see if the effects found here apply to this acculturation dimension.

Furthermore, the sample in this study was obtained online, using the platform Prolific.ac. There have been concerns in the past regarding such online crowdsourcing platforms (Chmielewski & Kucker, 2019). However, Prolific.ac has been shown to be superior to other online platforms in terms of data quality and diversity of participants (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Nevertheless, the lack of control over the sample obtained may raise issues related to generalizability, and this should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

Another point of discussion relates to the methods used in the study. This study relied solely on quantitative data obtained through surveys, in line with most previous studies in the field of acculturation. However, acculturation

is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, and reducing it to a single measurable variable can be considered problematic (Ozer, 2013). In particular, although this present study attempts to cover a range of different acculturation domains, each domain was still only measured by a single survey item. Therefore, future research could consider mixed-method approaches when studying acculturation to overcome this limitation and allow for more in-depth understanding of how people think about and understand these concepts.

Finally, this study shows that future research further considering majority culture change is beneficial to the understanding of acculturation and intergroup relations. Future research should consider particular individual or group-level moderators of the effects found in this present study. For example, political orientation might be a variable of interest when considering attitudes towards majority culture change. Furthermore, this study conceptualised the outgroup at a more abstract level, that is, using the term "minority member" more generally. Although previous studies have shown that particular acculturation attitudes may generalise to minority members in general (Tip et al., 2012), some minority groups are evaluated more negatively than others (Ford, 2011). Therefore, future research should focus on examining how the attitudes found in this paper might differ for particular minority groups.

Importantly, findings from this study have some important implications for intergroup relations in multicultural societies. Studies on majority culture change have shown that majority members who adopt aspects of minority culture show more positive adaptation responses (Haugen & Kunst, 2017); therefore, it is important to focus interventions on altering perceptions of threat from minority cultures and encouraging intergroup contact and cultural diversity.

Of course, the findings in this study should be understood in relation to the UK context. The UK is a multicultural society with a history of significant post-war and EU enlargement immigration. The extent to which these findings generalise to other countries and cultures remains an open question, and future research should explore such findings in other countries and cultures, particularly those where the understanding of multiculturalism is different.

To conclude, this study presents some findings which aim to build a more complete picture of the acculturation story from an intergroup perspective. While most studies in this area have been focussed on culture change solely in the minority group, it has been argued that majority culture change is important in the acculturation process (Redfield et al., 1936). This study has supported this idea, showing that when majority members perceive that minority members expect them to adopt aspects of minority culture, they are likely to show heightened perceptions of threat and therefore show a preference for minority members' assimilation towards the majority

culture. Therefore, exploring the acculturation model from a majority culture change perspective can also shed light on particular barriers to multiculturalism and intergroup relations in society.

## ETHICAL COMPLIANCE SECTION

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Royal Holloway ethics committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the study.

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