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**Intergroup contact with migrants is linked to support for migrants through attitudes,
especially in people who are politically right wing**

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Abstract

Due to the significance of the “refugee crisis” for European residents, the present research examined the link between residents’ support for newly arriving migrants and different types of intergroup contact with migrants. We compared the associations between support for migrants, and both positive and negative direct and mass mediated contact. In the link between contact and support, we examined the mediating role of residents’ attitudes towards migrants and the moderating role of their political orientation. In a Swiss sample ($N = 861$), only direct but not mass mediated contact was associated with support for migrants. Both positive and negative direct contact was linked to (higher vs. lower) support for migrants through (more vs. less positive) attitudes towards migrants. Relevant for interventions aimed at improving relations of host society with migrants, both positive and negative contact influenced support for migrants through attitudes, especially in people with a right wing political orientation.

Keywords: intergroup contact, mass media, migrants, support, attitudes

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The “refugee crisis” represents a challenge for receiving countries since their residents must come to terms with an inflow of migrants unprecedented in recent history (Edwards, 2016). Across Europe, immigration has become the most prominent issue of concern (Standard Eurobarometer, 2015, 2017), decisively influencing the political climate in receiving countries. Political parties that employ anti-migrant rhetoric have taken issue with the high number of asylum seekers reaching Europe, fueling prejudice against migrants (Anderson, 2017). The goal of the present study is to examine factors that relate to residents’ prejudice against – and support for – migrants from the current “migration wave”, taking into account residents’ political orientation.

Contact with members of stigmatized groups is an effective strategy for improving intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, the beneficial effects of intergroup contact can stop at the level of attitudes and not translate into behaviors directed at outgroups (e.g., Durrheim & Dixon, 2004). Recently, contact studies have started to use behavioral intentions that are closer to actual behavior than attitudes (Meleady & Vermue, 2019; Reimer et al. 2017). In those studies, attitudes are employed either as an outcome along with behavioral intentions, or as a mediator explaining the link between contact and behavioral intentions. For instance, Meleady and Vermue (2019, Study 1) found that while both positive and negative contact of White Americans with Black Americans was associated with attitudes (in terms of preferred social distance from Black Americans), only positive contact was associated with intentions for collective action on behalf of Black Americans. In the context of LGBT minorities, positive and negative contact was associated with heterosexual participants’ support for LGBT minorities, through attitudes towards the LGBT community (Reimer et al. 2017; Study 1). The present research investigates the link between host society members’ positive and negative contact with and support for migrants newly arriving to Europe from Africa, including attitudes towards migrants as a mediator.

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Despite the widely recognized beneficial effects of intergroup contact on improving intergroup relations, direct contact can be often limited due to the lack of opportunities to meet outgroup members (e.g., due to placement of asylum seekers in receiving centers) or hesitation to take up the opportunities to meet outgroup members. As a result, people's experience with outgroup members is often indirect, especially through mass media, which plays an important role in transmitting information about outgroups and shaping attitudes towards them (Graf, Linhartova, & Sczesny, 2019; Pagotto & Voci, 2013; Rugar & Graf, 2019; Visintin, Voci, Pagotto, & Hewstone, 2017). However, no study has so far compared the associations of both positive and negative, direct as well as mass mediated contact with outgroup members and people's behavioral intentions towards the given outgroup, considering the mediating role of outgroup attitudes.

The topic of migration is currently one of the most influential issues politically – the ways in which politicians handle the issue can either gain or cost them a vote (e.g., Davis & Deole, 2017). Parties at the right pole of the political spectrum often fuel prejudice against migrants and their rising power represents an obstacle to the provision of migrants' protection in receiving countries (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017; UNHCR, 2009). Past studies have documented that prejudice-reducing interventions based on intergroup contact are especially effective in highly prejudiced individuals (i.e., those high in social dominance orientation, SDO, Hodson, 2008; or right wing authoritarianism, RWA, Asbrock, Christ, Duckitt, & Sibley, 2012). Despite the established association between ideological inclinations (i.e., SDO or RWA) and political preferences (e.g., Hiel & Mervielde, 2002), direct evidence of the role political orientation plays in the link between intergroup contact, prejudice, and behavioral intentions is still missing.

The present research examines links between host society members' positive and negative direct and mass mediated contact with newly arriving migrants and their intention to

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support migrants – measured as willingness to donate money to a NGO that supports migrants. In doing so, the study contrasts the individual-level experiences from direct contact with macro-level influence from mass media. In the link between different types of intergroup contact and support for migrants, we tested the mediating role of attitudes towards migrants and the moderating role of residents' political orientation. The study focused on migrants from Africa, since African migrants best embody the mixed-migration nature of the current “refugee crisis” when both economic migrants and asylum seekers arrive to receiving countries. We sampled the data in Switzerland, one of the main destinations for asylum seekers from the current “migration wave” in Europe (Swiss State Secretariat for Migration, 2016).

Method

Participants. The sample consisted of 861 Swiss university students (66% women, $M_{age} = 23.73$, $SD = 4.77$; addressed via university email) who filled out an online questionnaire. All participants gave their informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study. We rewarded their participation with a lottery, drawing two prizes of 100 CHF (app. \$100).

Procedure and materials. The questionnaire was part of a larger study that dealt with attitudes towards African migrants and immigration policies.¹

First, participants reported their *attitudes towards migrants* by indicating the warmth of their feelings towards African migrants on a feeling thermometer (Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993). The responses ranged from 0 (cold) to 100 (warm) with greater values indicating more positive attitudes.

¹ We also measured social distance from African migrants, attitudes towards immigration policies, emotions, and national identification that are not of interest in the current paper.

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Next, we measured *support for migrants* with one item asking participants what percentage of their potential win in the lottery they would donate to a Swiss NGO that helps migrants after their arrival to Switzerland (adapted from Reimer et al., 2017). Participants could donate between 0 to 100% of their potential reward (i.e., 100 CHF) with 10-point increments.

Positive and negative direct and mass mediated contact was measured with one item each inquiring about the frequency of positive and negative experiences with African migrants and positive and negative information about African migrants from the mass media. The responses ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (very often) with greater values indicating more contact.

Finally, we measured participants' *political orientation* with a 100-point scale with 10-point increments from very left (0) to very right (100). We asked participants which Swiss political party they support (with the options: Swiss People's Party, Social Democratic Party of Switzerland, the Liberals, Christian Democratic People's Party of Switzerland, Green Party of Switzerland, Green Liberal Party, Conservative Democratic Party, and other). At the end of the questionnaire, participants indicated their age, gender, education, and were debriefed.

Results

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations, including correlations between all variables. We employed a linear regression to compare the links between support for migrants and (simultaneously entered) positive and negative direct and mass mediated contact, also including participants' gender, age, and education, $R^2 = .11$, $F(7, 463) = 8.17$, $p < .001$.²

² The sample reduction from 861 to 471 participants was due to the fact that 390 participants did not report any experience of direct contact with African migrants and were thus deleted

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Positive direct contact was associated with more support for migrants, $\beta = .12$, $t(463) = 2.23$, $p = .03$, negative direct contact with less support, $\beta = -.23$, $t(463) = -4.27$, $p < .001$. In contrast, neither positive, $\beta = .02$, $t(463) = 0.48$, $p = .634$, nor negative information about African migrants from the mass media, $\beta = .06$, $t(463) = 1.28$, $p = .203$, was associated with participants' intention to donate money to a charity helping migrants.³ From the demographic variables, only participants' gender significantly predicted support for migrants, $\beta = .11$, $t(463) = 2.34$, $p = .020$, in that women intended to donate money to the NGO more than men.

-----Insert Table 1 about here-----

Next, we examined the moderated mediation employing the PROCESS macro for SPSS (model 7; Hayes, 2013) in order to determine whether positive and negative direct contact with migrants was associated with support for migrants through attitudes towards migrants depending on participants' political orientations (see Figure 1). We included positive and negative mass mediated contact, participants' gender, age and education as covariates into the model.⁴

-----Insert Figure 1 about here-----

Political orientation moderated the link between *positive direct* contact and attitudes towards African migrants, $B = .09$, $SE = .03$, $p = .006$, 95% Bootstrap CI [0.03, 0.16]. The

from the analyses. This illustrates the limited intergroup contact of the host society with newly arriving migrants.

³ Positive and negative mass mediated contact was not associated with support for migrants even if direct contact was not included into the linear regression, $R^2 = .00$, $F(2, 858) = 0.80$, $p = .452$.

⁴ Political orientation did not moderate the effect of positive and negative *mass mediated* contact on either attitudes towards or support for migrants.

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indirect effect of positive contact on support for migrants, through attitudes towards migrants, was the strongest for those with a political orientation towards the right pole of the spectrum, weaker for people with a political orientation in the center of the spectrum, and the weakest for those with a left wing political orientation (see the left side of Table 2).

Political orientation also moderated the link between *negative direct* contact and attitudes towards African migrants, $B = -.10$, $SE = .03$, $p = .002$, 95% Bootstrap CI [-0.16, -0.04]. The indirect effect of negative contact through attitudes towards migrants on support for migrants was again the strongest for those with a political orientation towards the right pole of the political spectrum and weaker for those with a political orientation in the center of the spectrum. The indirect effect of negative contact on support for migrants through attitudes was not significant for those with a political orientation towards the left pole of the spectrum (see the right side of Table 2).⁵

-----Insert Table 2 about here-----

Discussion

Migration has become the most relevant topic for European residents (Standard Eurobarometer, 2015, 2017) and thus, factors that influence attitudes towards and support for migrants are high on the agenda of socially engaged research. In the Swiss context, participants' support for migrants was linked to their direct experiences with migrants. While their positive experiences were associated with higher support for migrants, negative direct experiences were associated with lower support for a migrant-related cause. Although indirect contact represents an important source of information about outgroups when opportunities for direct contact are lacking (e.g., Christ et al., 2014), in the present study, neither positive nor

⁵ Political orientation did not moderate the effect of either positive or negative *direct* contact on support for migrants.

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negative information from the mass media was associated with support for African migrants, even if participants lacked direct experiences with African migrants.

Both positive and negative direct experiences were linked to support for migrants through attitudes towards migrants. Participants' political orientation qualified this indirect effect of contact on support, being the strongest for those who endorsed ideology towards the right pole of the political spectrum. Encouragingly, positive direct experiences with migrants were associated with more positive attitudes towards migrants especially in participants with right wing political beliefs. Past research has already documented the beneficial effects of intergroup contact in highly prejudiced individuals (e.g., Asbrock et al., 2012). However, such optimistic findings are toned down by our results that also negative direct contact – that has been neglected in past research on intergroup contact – was associated with more negative attitudes towards migrants, especially in participants with right wing political orientation. Interestingly, political orientation did not qualify the direct effect of contact on support for migrants. Future studies should thus test the boundary conditions of the effect of intergroup contact on behavior-related proxies.

Migration may be a sensitive topic in people with right wing political orientation and consequently, both positive and negative experiences with migrants are more strongly linked to their attitudes towards migrants, as compared to participants with a left wing political orientation. In the context of our study, Swiss participants with a right wing political orientation were mostly proponents of the Swiss People's Party (the party with most electoral support in Switzerland; Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2018) that is known for its anti-immigration stance (Swiss People's Party, 2018; Swissinfo, 2018). Right wing political orientation goes hand in hand with anti-immigrant attitudes in most political contexts (e.g., De Vries, Hakhverdian, & Lancee, 2013) and consequently, interventions aimed at increasing

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acceptance of migrants in society should be particularly targeted towards people endorsing right wing political ideologies.

As this is the first study that has examined the role of political orientation in the associations between positive and negative contact with, attitudes towards and support for migrants, it has some limitations. We employed a sample of university students, a cross-sectional design and focused on African migrants. Future studies should therefore target more diverse samples, inquire about other migrant groups, and employ a longitudinal design. Furthermore, we measured support for migrants with only one item inquiring about participants' readiness to donate money, which they could potentially win in a lottery, to a migrant-related cause. This represents a zero-sum situation where the more migrants get the less participants can keep for themselves. Despite the fact that most participants in our study were students who supposedly do not much differ with respect to their income, financial situation of participants could have influenced their readiness to donate money. The question also remains to what extent the employed behavioral intention predicts real-life supportive behavior such as donating actual money to migrant-related cause. Although we believe that the readiness to donate money from a lottery is a better proxy for supportive behavior than a hypothetical willingness to sign a petition (for a similar point see Reimer et al., 2017), more research employing differentiated measurement of support for migrants that assesses a wider range of behaviors in support of migrants is needed.

To conclude, the results of our study highlight that intergroup contact can act as a double-edged sword in interventions targeting prejudiced individuals. While positive contact is effective in strengthening support for migrants, especially for people who endorse right wing political ideologies, so is negative contact in limiting their support.

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Tables

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Intergroup Contact with, Attitudes towards and Support for African Migrants and Political Orientation

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Positive direct	3.67	1.00	471	-	-.54***	-.03	.08	.56***	.25***	-.42***
2. Negative direct	2.42	1.12	471		-	.06	.03	-.50***	-.28***	.38***
3. Positive mass mediated	2.01	0.76	861			-	-.23***	-.02	-.02	.05
4. Negative mass mediated	3.84	0.84	861				-	.07*	.04	-.14***
5. Attitudes tow. migrants	64.59	22.05	861					-	.29***	-.48***
6. Support for migrants	43.31	38.60	861						-	-.26***
7. Political orientation	33.71	20.80	861							-

Note. Different forms of intergroup contact were measured on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Attitudes towards migrants, support for migrants and political orientation were given on scales ranging from 0 (less positive attitudes; less support; left wing political orientation) to 100 (more positive attitudes; more support; right wing political orientation), in 10 point increments.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

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Table 2

Conditional Indirect Effects of Positive and Negative Direct Contact with African Migrants on Support for Migrants through Attitudes towards Migrants in People with Right Wing, Center, and Left Wing Political Orientation

	Positive direct contact	Negative direct contact
Political orientation:		
Right wing	$B = 2.19, SE = 0.87$ [0.63, 4.05]	$B = -1.53, SE = 0.66$ [-3.02, -0.46]
Center	$B = 1.70, SE = 0.67$ [0.50, 3.08]	$B = -1.00, SE = 0.45$ [-2.10, -0.30]
Left wing	$B = 1.20, SE = 0.54$ [0.36, 2.51]	$B = -0.46, SE = 0.37$ [-1.46, 0.06]

Note. 5000 bootstrap samples were used to obtain the bias corrected 95% bootstrap confidence intervals given in brackets. The conditional effects were estimated at the mean and +/- one SD from mean of the moderator (i.e., political orientation).

Figures

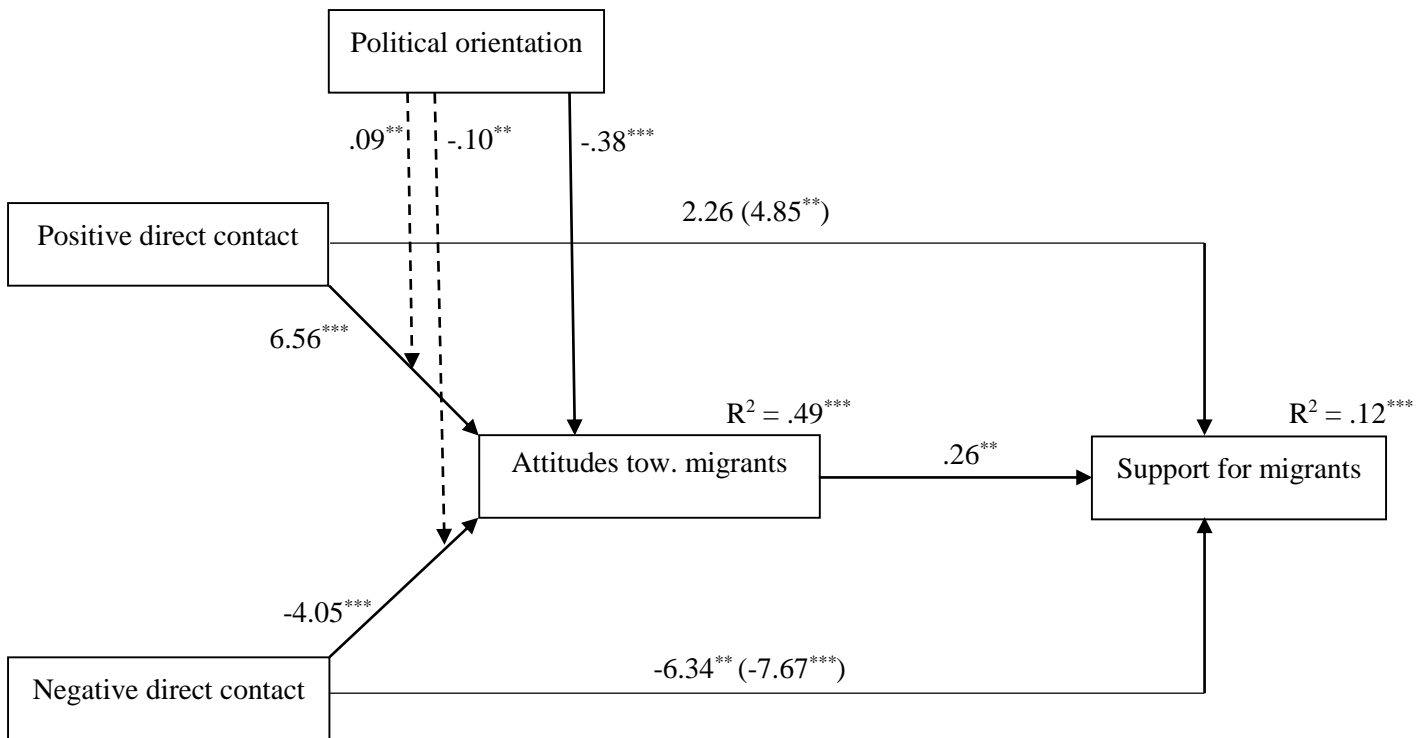


Figure 1. The effects of positive and negative direct intergroup contact with African migrants on support for African migrants mediated by attitudes towards African migrants, controlling for the effect of positive and negative mass mediated contact, participants' gender, age and education. The dashed lines represent the interaction term between participants' political orientation and positive or negative direct contact. The index of the moderated mediation for positive direct contact, $B = .02$, $SE = .01$, 95% Bootstrap CI [.01, .06], and for negative direct contact, $B = -.03$, $SE = .01$, 95% Bootstrap CI [-.06, -.01]. Non-standardized coefficients are presented. $n = 471$.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.