

# The Power of Positive Thinking: How Positive Opinions of Refugees' Impact on the Host Society Generate Positive Behavioural Intentions

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Much prior research has focused on understanding how host nationals' negative opinions of the impact of migration and arriving communities affect their attitudes towards newcomers. Yet, the role of host nationals' positive opinions has remained largely under-investigated. The present study aims to move beyond the negative intergroup paradigm and contribute to the literature by examining whether positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host society are related to host nationals' positive behavioural intentions towards them. Specifically, the study investigated (1) the mediating role of social proximity in the relationship between positive opinions of refugees' impact and readiness to assist them and (2) symbolic and realistic threats as potential moderators that might influence this direct/indirect relationship. The results provide initial evidence of the important role of positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host community in promoting positive behavioural intentions towards newcomers via indirect association with closer social proximity. Moreover, our findings suggest that this relationship might be particularly beneficial for host nationals who perceive immigrants as imposing a realistic threat to their lives and to society as a whole—individuals who tend to be amongst the most prejudice-prone and resistant to change.

Keywords: refugees, positive impact, host nationals, behavioural intentions, threat perceptions, social proximity

## Introduction

While forced displacement is not a phenomenon new to social and migration studies, the current global involuntary movement by refugees is unprecedented in its scale and nature ([United States Senate 2020](#)). According to the latest data provided by the UN Refugee Agency ([UNHCR 2020](#)), the number of people forcibly displaced due to war, conflict, persecution, human rights violations, and events seriously disturbing public order surpassed 80 million by mid-2020, which represents the highest levels of displacement on record. Such an unprecedented movement of refugees and asylum seekers into Western societies has made concerns about their successful integration a primary political and societal issue for many receiving countries, including Sweden. Immigration to Sweden has grown substantially over the last three decades, with refugees and their families representing up to 50 per cent of the yearly intake. Since the early 1990s, when over 100,000 refugees from the former Yugoslavia fled to Sweden, refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and—in the last decade—Syria have settled in Sweden. This inflow encompasses over 600,000 individuals—almost 6 per cent of the Swedish population ([Statistics Sweden 2021](#)). Despite being regarded as one of the most successful countries in the European Union concerning its integration policy ([Solano and Huddleston 2020](#)), Sweden, like many other EU countries, has faced a shift of public opinion on migration and refugees to a more negative and polarized perception ([Bevelander 2022](#); [Bevelander and Hellström 2019](#)). Recent research points to the end of Swedish exceptionalism, which was associated with the previous, relatively generous, Swedish path and the absence of any populist radical party in the national parliament. This is, obviously, no longer the case ([Emilsson 2018](#); [Rydgren and Van Der Meiden 2019](#)). Specifically, the anti-immigrant party, the Sweden Democrats (SD), has grown from 5.7 per cent of the votes in the 2010 elections and gaining access to parliament, to 12.9 per cent in 2014 and 17.5 per cent in the 2018 elections ([Bevelander and Hellström 2019](#); [Rydgren and Van Der Meiden 2019](#)).<sup>1</sup> These social trends can have important implications for Swedes' opinions of refugees and point to the urgent need to invest more into understanding what might promote more positive attitudes and behavioural orientations towards newcomers.

In this article, based on recent data collected in Sweden in 2021, we focus on host nationals' readiness to assist refugees (defined as 'people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country'—[UNHCR 2020](#)). We analyse the potential role that positive opinions of refugees' impact on society, feelings of social proximity, as well as symbolic and realistic threats might have in affecting these positive behavioural intentions. More specifically, we examine whether the relationship between positive opinions of refugees' impact and host nationals' readiness to assist them is mediated by feelings of social proximity and whether these relationships are conditional upon symbolic and realistic threats (i.e. the moderated mediation model).

## What We Know about Host Nationals' Behavioural Intentions towards Refugees

Much prior research has focused on understanding how host nationals' negative opinions of the impact of arriving communities (e.g. immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers) on the formers' lives—or on the host society as a whole—affect their attitudes towards newcomers. This body of research commonly draws upon the idea that negative attitudes and xenophobia tend to increase when the societal majority feels that arriving community members pose a challenge to their own economic, cultural, national, or subjective well-being (e.g. McLaren and Johnson 2007; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Korol and Bevelander 2021; Korol *et al.* 2022). In line with this theoretical perspective, previous studies on attitudes towards immigrants, for example have shown that hostility towards these outgroup members stem from perceptions that they jeopardize the native population—for instance, by taking their jobs (e.g. Billiet *et al.* 2014), challenging cultural identity, beliefs and values (e.g. Wagner *et al.* 2010), undermining the welfare system and social benefits (e.g. Semyonov *et al.* 2006), etc. Furthermore, recent research on refugees (although still very limited in scope) has found that host nationals' perceptions of refugees as negatively affecting their ingroup and host society are also strongly related to their negative attitudes towards this group (e.g. Hercowitz-Amir *et al.* 2017; Landmann *et al.* 2019; Meidert and Rapp 2019).

Considerably less theoretical and empirical attention has been paid to understanding how host nationals' positive opinions of the impact of arriving community members—and refugees in particular—affect their attitudes and behaviour towards newcomers. At the same time, as stated by Stürmer and colleagues (e.g. Barbarino and Stürmer 2016; Siem *et al.* 2016), just as the formation of altruism and prosocial behaviour cannot simply be based on the reduction (or absence) of determinants causing aggression, forms of positive outgroup orientations cannot simply be extrapolated from reducing prejudice, anxiety, or hostility. Understanding positive behaviour towards refugees requires a different perspective—a perspective accounting for processes that prompt host nationals to deliberately display and engage in positive behaviour. A mounting body of recent intergroup research has started to go beyond the negative intergroup paradigm and has looked at increasing positive outgroup orientations independently of decreasing negative attitudes and perceptions (e.g. Korol *et al.* 2018; Korol 2019). Consistent with this emerging research line, the present study focuses on the relationship between positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host community and host nationals' positive behavioural intentions towards them.

Existing intergroup research provides some theoretical and empirical insights into how positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host society might impact native majority individuals' positive orientations towards them. The first explanation relies on the notion of functional indispensability—defined as the perceived instrumentality of a group's contribution to a superordinate outcome (Guerra *et al.* 2015). In other words, different groups in a society can be considered indispensable in a functionally and socially advantageous way, such as contributing to

the society's economy and prosperity (Guerra *et al.* 2015, 2016). Supporting this theoretical perspective, prior studies have shown that perceiving immigrants as indispensable to the functioning of the host society (e.g. contributing to the society's economic success) is positively related to more positive attitudes and less negative emotions towards them (Guerra *et al.* 2015, 2016) as well as greater support for immigrants' cultural rights (Mepham and Verkuyten 2017) in both European and US contexts. Applied to the context of the present study, perceiving refugees as being indispensable for the functioning of the host society might reflect more-valuable views about them and, therefore, promote more positive outgroup orientations in the host population (Mepham and Verkuyten 2017).

The second explanation is built upon the threat–benefit theoretical model (Tartakovsky and Walsh 2016), which postulates that perceiving arriving communities as threatening and/or beneficial for the host society has important implications for the local population's views and attitudes towards newcomers. According to this theory, arriving community members may be appraised as an economic, cultural diversity, humanitarian, and social-cohesion benefit to the receiving society (see Tartakovsky and Walsh 2016 for a more detailed description). Supporting these theoretical arguments, a recent study in Israel (Walsh and Tartakovsky 2021) has found that native majority Jewish individuals who appraised different immigrant groups as beneficial to the receiving society were more likely to report more-frequent social contact with them. Moreover, previous studies showed that perceiving asylum seekers as beneficial to the host society is linked to greater support for immigration policies directed at defending asylum seekers' rights (Tartakovsky and Walsh 2016) and more positive attitudes towards their permanent settlement (Thraivalou *et al.* 2021).

Despite the mounting body of evidence that host nationals' positive opinions of the impact of arriving community members are related to more positive outgroup orientations towards them, we are still limited in our understanding of the mechanisms that might underlie this relationship. Specifically, little is known about the *mediating processes* through which positive perceptions of refugees' impact on the host society might lead host nationals to adopt positive behavioural orientations towards them as well as *moderating conditions* that explain for whom this relationship might be more beneficial. To address this important gap in the current literature, the present study aims to examine (1) *social proximity* as a potential mediator that might link positive opinions of refugees' impact and readiness to assist them among Swedish host nationals and (2) *symbolic and realistic threats* as potential moderators that might influence this direct/indirect link (see Figure 1).

### Social Proximity as a Potential Mediator

Social proximity might function as one of the potential pathways through which positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host society might lead to greater readiness by the host population to assist them. Social proximity (i.e. the opposite of social distance) refers to the general willingness to engage in social relationships of varying degrees of intimacy with a person belonging to a different ethnic and

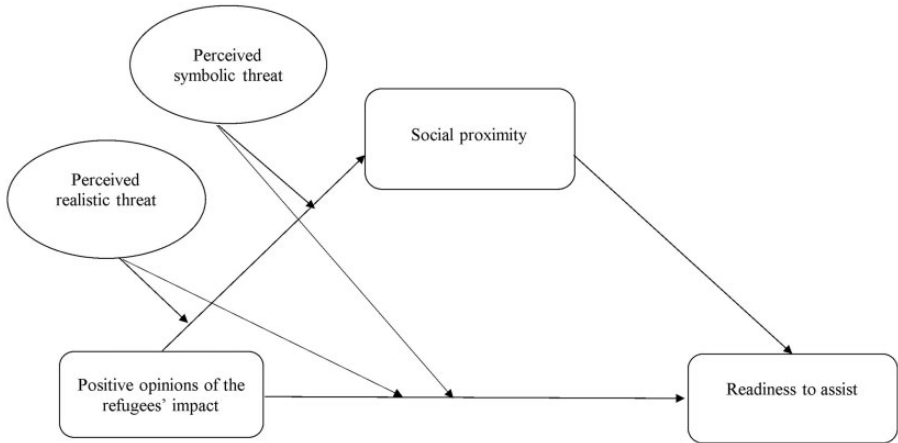


Figure 1.

### The Summarized Conceptual Model of the Moderated Mediation

cultural outgroup (Bogardus 1925). High social proximity is strongly related to high levels of intergroup understanding and strong positive feelings towards outgroup members. Prior research provides some empirical evidence that host nationals' opinions of arriving community members—including immigrants and refugees—impact on the host society play an important role in shaping their social proximity to newcomers. For instance, in their recent research on Syrian refugees, Koc and Anderson (2018) found that people who reported that they felt intergroup anxiety when interacting with Syrian refugees in the USA were more likely to display lower social proximity. At the same time, the researchers showed that a story-reading intervention (as a form of positive media representation) reduced social distance from Syrian refugees by decreasing participants' intergroup anxiety. In a similar vein, Guerra *et al.* (2015) demonstrated that the more native Portuguese citizens perceived immigrants (particularly of Ukrainian and Brazilian descendant) as contributing to the economic and social development of the host society, the less social distance they maintained from immigrants. Overall, positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host society may make host nationals more likely to feel socially closer to arriving community members and potentially drive their willingness to engage in different forms of social relationships with newcomers.

Existing research also suggests that the levels of social proximity that host nationals feel towards immigrants and refugees are closely related to their outgroup orientations and behavioural intentions. In their recent study, Hadarics *et al.* (2020) found that members of the Hungarian majority population who maintained a greater social distance from Roma and Muslim immigrants were also more likely to report higher levels of engagement in group-based moral exclusion (conceptualized as the acceptance of immoral behaviour towards members of the outgroup). In a similar vein, Ajduković *et al.* (2019) found that Croatian

citizens who reported a greater readiness for closer social proximity with persons under international protection were more likely to hold positive attitudes towards them as well as be more ready to personally assist them. Relatedly, a recent experimental study (Boulu-Reshef and Schulhofer-Wohl 2019) showed that greater social distance leads to a greater propensity to engage in parochial altruism (conceptualized as an individual sacrifice to benefit the ingroup and harm an outgroup). Taken together, existing empirical evidence suggests that positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host society might be related to host nationals' social proximity and that social proximity might be related to their behavioural intentions towards new arrivals.

At the same time, the relationship between positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host society and host nationals' social proximity, on the one hand, and the relationship between social proximity and host nationals' behavioural intentions, on the other hand, do not suggest a specific line of causation in a potential mediation model. Therefore, we derive our reasoning from intergroup literature suggesting that outgroup attitudes mediate the effects of intergroup variables on promoting positive outgroup orientations. Specifically, a number of prior studies have provided consistent evidence that more positive outgroup attitudes mediate the effects of various forms of intergroup interactions (e.g. West and Turner 2014; De Tezanos-Pinto *et al.* 2017), on facilitating positive intergroup relations. In addition, recent experimental research among school children has shown that improved outgroup attitudes mediate the path between imagining an intergroup interaction with an outgroup member (i.e. disabled children in a wheelchair) and positive outgroup behavioural intentions such as meeting or playing (Vezzali *et al.* 2020). As argued by Vezzali *et al.* (2020), outgroup attitudes can function as a particularly relevant mediator in this relationship. Since people with disabilities are a frequently stigmatised group, it is crucial to first change attitudes towards them; only when prejudicial beliefs are reduced will participants become more willing to assist and interact with them. In a similar vein, we argue that social proximity attitudes might have an important role to play in mediating the relationship between positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host society and host nationals' readiness to assist them. Specifically, perceiving refugees as contributing to the host society might first increase host nationals' willingness to engage in closer interpersonal relationships with arriving community members. This in turn might make host nationals more prone to display positive behavioural orientations towards refugees and, in particular, increase their readiness to assist newcomers.

### **Perceptions of Symbolic and Realistic Threats as Potential Moderators**

Positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host society may promote closer social proximity and, in turn, positive behavioural intentions among the host community. At the same time, not all members of the host community may be equally likely to benefit from the relationship of positive opinions of refugees' impact with closer social proximity and readiness to assist them. We argue that host nationals'

perceptions of the threat posed by refugees might have an important moderating role in this relationship.

Prior research has provided compelling evidence that host nationals who view immigrants and refugees as posing a threat to their actual economic or physical well-being (i.e. a realistic threat) or to their group's cultural values, traditions, or ideology (i.e. a symbolic threat) are more prone to displaying prejudicial attitudes and having negative behavioural intentions towards them (see, for example [Yitmen and Verkuyten 2018](#); [Cowling \*et al.\* 2019](#)). Moreover, the existing literature suggests that individual views, beliefs, and feelings towards ethnically diverse groups may also moderate the effects of other factors influencing intergroup orientations. Research on intergroup contact, in particular, has demonstrated that intergroup interactions work better at reducing negative outgroup dispositions among individuals characterised by high (vs low) prejudicial beliefs—such as high authoritarians or individuals who view the world as dangerous and threatening ([van Hiel \*et al.\* 2007](#)) since these individuals benefit the most from such interactions. Relatedly, [Adesokan \*et al.\* \(2011\)](#) showed that the relationship between intergroup contact and reduced prejudice was stronger for individuals holding less favourable diversity beliefs compared to those with more positive ones. The authors argued that individuals who have doubts about the potential contribution of outgroup members to society as a whole (i.e. unfavourable diversity beliefs) are more likely to adjust their views following intergroup interactions compared to individuals who already value the contribution of outgroup members (i.e. favourable diversity beliefs).

At the same time, according to the earlier mentioned threat–benefit model ([Tartakovsky and Walsh 2016](#)), arriving community members might be viewed as simultaneously a threat (i.e. physical, economic, social cohesion, and modernity) and a benefit (i.e. physical, economic, cultural diversity, and humanitarian) to the host society, both in several specific domains and in general. Supporting these theoretical premises, [Tartakovsky and Walsh \(2020\)](#) showed that natives' perceptions of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and from Ethiopia in Israel varied across different domains. Specifically, while immigrants from the FSU were viewed as posing a stronger threat to social cohesion (compared to immigrants from Ethiopia), they were also simultaneously perceived as bringing stronger economic benefits than immigrants from Ethiopia. Altogether, these findings suggest that viewing refugees as bringing benefits to the host community in a certain domain (e.g. the economic sphere) might be particularly beneficial for host nationals who are more prone to see them as threatening in other domains (e.g. security, social cohesion, and modernity). Therefore, it is possible that the members of the host community who view refugees as imposing realistic and symbolic threats to the host society at large might be those for whom the relationship of positive opinions of refugees' impact with closer social proximity and readiness to assist will be especially strong and effective.

Alternatively, another theoretical perspective implies that individuals' reaction to the perceived outgroup threat is directed to reduce this threat (or at least its consequences) by increasing negative behavioural intentions such as

discriminatory behaviour towards the outgroup (Falomir-Pichastor *et al.* 2004). Supporting this perspective, Falomir-Pichastor *et al.* (2004) found that Swiss nationals' anti-discriminatory ingroup norm reduced discrimination against foreigners but only when the perceived ingroup threat was low. Relatedly, a recent experimental study in Spain (Urbiola *et al.* 2018) showed that the multicultural perspective was effective in reducing implicit bias against *Gitanos* (Spanish Roma) only among those native youth who did not perceive *Gitanos* as a threat but yielded no such observable effect among participants with high levels of perceived threat. Applying this reasoning, it is possible that positive opinions of refugees' impact might be effective in promoting closer social proximity to and positive behavioural intentions towards refugees only among host nationals with low levels of realistic and symbolic threat.

Taken together, realistic and symbolic threats can be an important condition that determines how positive opinions of refugees' impact are related to host community members' willingness to engage in social relations with them and readiness to assist new arrivals. Nonetheless, no research to date has focused on understanding the role of threat perceptions in this relationship. We aim to address this important gap in current knowledge.

### **The Present Study**

The present study is designed to understand the processes that might underlie the relationship between positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host society and host nationals' readiness to assist newcomers. We focus on addressing two research questions (Q).

- Q1: Does social proximity mediate the relationship between positive opinions of refugees' impact and host nationals' readiness to assist them?

Building upon prior research in the field, we assume that positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host society as a whole might be related to a greater willingness to engage in social relationships with newcomers which, in turn, might be linked to a greater readiness to assist them.

- Q2: Is the direct/indirect relationship between positive opinions of refugees' impact and host nationals' readiness to assist them via its associations with social proximity conditional upon realistic and symbolic threats?

Given the contrary theoretical arguments and empirical findings concerning the potential moderating role of realistic and symbolic threats in host nationals' outgroup orientations, we did not propose any specific hypothesis in this second research area. At the same time, we expect that the relationship between positive opinions of refugees' impact and host nationals' social proximity and readiness to assist newcomers will be different among individuals with higher and lower levels of realistic and symbolic threats.



## Methods

### *Participants*

The data for this study were extracted from a large-scale survey conducted in Sweden as a part of the FOCUS ('Forced displacement and refugee-host community solidarity') project (see [Irastorza and Korol 2021](#) for details). The main goal of the FOCUS project was to understand and improve the dynamics of integration between the arriving and the host community members, with a particular emphasis on how socio-psychological factors impact on this process. A population register was used to randomly select a sample of 6000 host community members (i.e. individuals who had citizenship of or permanent residency in Sweden and had been living in the country for at least 7 years at the time of data collection) in three major cities of Sweden with different socio-economic features (i.e. Stockholm, Malmö, and Gothenburg). The questionnaire was mailed to the target sample, together with the log-in information for a web-based version of the survey. Out of the 6000 people who received the questionnaire, a total of 1495 people answered it. All the procedures were approved by the National Ethics Authority.

For the purposes of this study, we focused only on host community members aged 18–65 years. After processing the data, the final analytic sample was made up of 1277 individuals: 690 living in Stockholm, 386 in Gothenburg, and 201 in Malmö. Of the analytic sample, 47.8 per cent were female. Concerning marital status, 73.7 per cent said that they were married or engaged in a relationship, 24.1 per cent that they were single, 1.3 per cent that they were separated/divorced, and 0.9 per cent that they were widowed. Regarding education level, 25.9 per cent of the respondents had a Master's, Doctoral or equivalent degree, 29.4 per cent had a BA, 18.9 per cent had finished technical-institute programmes, and 21.5 per cent had a general secondary or vocational education. About one-third of the respondents (30.4 per cent) had a migration background and the average net income level among the analytic sample was 34,291.50 SEK (around 3320 euros) per month.

### *Measures*

All the measures used in the survey were adapted from prior research on the socio-psychological integration of refugees into the host community ([Ajduković \*et al.\* 2019](#); see also [Ajduković and Kiralj 2019](#)) and translated into Swedish (see [Irastorza and Korol 2021](#) for specific details).

### *Opinions of the Refugees' Impact*

A six-item scale was used to assess host nationals' opinions of refugees' impact on Swedish society. The sample items included 'In general, the refugees will reduce the shortage of labour in Sweden'; 'In general, the refugees will have a positive impact on economic growth in Sweden'; and 'The refugees in Sweden will bring more revenues than costs for the government'. The response scale ranged from 1

(*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host country (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

### *Perceived Symbolic and Realistic Threats*

To assess host nationals' perceptions of refugees as posing threats to the host community, the respondents were asked to rate seven items on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). More specifically, perceptions of refugees as a symbolic threat were measured via four items, including 'Refugees should adjust to the customs of our society if they wish to live here'; 'Refugees could endanger our values and our way of life'; and 'Religious and moral beliefs of refugees oppose those of Swedes'. In addition, perceptions of refugees as a realistic threat were measured via three items, including 'I fear that crime rates in Sweden could increase due to refugees'; 'I fear terrorist attacks by refugees who live here'; and 'Refugees take places at universities or jobs from Swedes'. Higher scores indicated higher perceptions of refugees as a symbolic (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ ) and realistic (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.80$ ) threat.

### *Social Proximity*

To measure the social proximity of host nationals towards refugees, respondents were asked to assess their willingness to engage in different types of relationship (i.e. family, love, friendship, neighbour, work) with newcomers. The sample items included 'I would accept a refugee as a family member'; 'I would become involved in a love relationship with a refugee'; and 'I would accept a refugee as a fellow worker'. Higher scores indicated a higher degree of social closeness with refugees (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

### *Readiness to Assist*

To assess host nationals' readiness to assist refugees, the respondents were asked to provide information on their preparedness to use personal resources (e.g. attention, property, time) to actively help arriving community members. The items included: 'I would be prepared to provide temporary care for an unaccompanied refugee child'; 'I would allow refugees to temporarily use my property that I don't need'; 'I would bring food and/or other supplies for refugees'; and 'I would be prepared to dedicate some time to assist refugees become involved in our community's life'. The response scale ranged from 1 (*Definitely not*) to 5 (*Definitely yes*). Higher scores indicated a greater readiness to assist (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

## **Data Analysis**

In the present study, data analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics Version 25 and the Hayes (2022) SPSS macro programme PROCESS. Specifically, as recommended and specified by Hayes (2022), PROCESS macro software Model 4 was used to test the mediating effect of social proximity on the relationship between

positive opinions of the refugees' impact and host nationals' readiness to assist them. This macro uses the bootstrapping method to test the significance of the mediating effect. It performs better (both in terms of its statistical power and Type I error) than the traditional causal steps approach advocated by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Sobel test procedures (Ouyang *et al.* 2017; Hayes 2022). In our study, we used 5000 bootstrap estimates for the construction of 95 per cent bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) for the effect estimates. We used CIs rather than the point estimate (or probability value) in evaluating the significance of the mediating effects because this method allows us to account for the distribution of estimates as part of making claims about significance. The effects were statistically significant if the 95 per cent bias-corrected CIs did not include zero. Furthermore, to test whether this indirect relationship was conditional upon perceived realistic and symbolic threats, we utilized PROCESS macro software Model 10. Since the regression analyses included interaction terms, variables that constitute an interaction product were mean-centred to minimize multicollinearity issues (Field 2009). Finally, we included age, gender, city, migration status, education, employment, income, and political orientation as control variables in all our analyses.

Inspection of the data for missing values showed that, among the 1277 respondents, 1247 (97.65 per cent) provided complete data on all the variables. The Little's missing completely at random test yielded a non-significant result,  $\chi^2(17) = 23.25$ ,  $p = 0.141$ , suggesting that the missingness in the data was completely at random. To handle missing data, we used the expectation–maximization (EM) method. EM is an appropriate tool for handling the amount of missing data in the current study and is preferable to other methods—such as listwise and pairwise deletion—that may potentially introduce bias and produce reduction in the total sample size (Schafer and Graham 2002). In addition, EM, which is based on the observed data log likelihood, is more efficient than the multiple imputation (MI) method because it does not require simulations, whereas MI does (Dong and Peng 2013).

## Results

### *Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses*

Positive opinions of refugees' impact were positively correlated with social proximity and readiness to assist and negatively associated with perceptions of realistic and symbolic threats. In addition, perceptions of these latter were negatively correlated with social proximity and host nationals' readiness to assist the arriving community of refugees. The descriptive statistics and correlation matrices between the study variables are available in the [Supplemental Material](#).

Preliminary analyses also revealed that male and older respondents perceived higher levels of symbolic ( $t(1273) = 4.65$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95 per cent CI = [0.18, 0.45];  $t(1273) = -7.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95 per cent CI = [-0.62, -0.36]; respectively) and realistic threats ( $t(1273) = 4.83$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95 per cent CI = [0.18, 0.42]; and  $t(1273) = -7.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95 per cent CI = [-0.58, -0.34]; respectively) from refugees than female and younger host nationals. At the same time, female and

younger respondents, compared to male and older ones, reported higher levels of positive opinions of the refugees' impact ( $t(1272) = -4.29, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = [-0.32, -0.12]$ ; and  $t(1272) = 4.97, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = [0.15, 0.35]$ ; respectively) and higher levels of readiness to assist refugees ( $t(1272) = -6.68, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = [-0.52, -0.28]$ ; and  $t(1272) = 4.95, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = [0.18, 0.42]$ ; respectively). In addition, younger members of the host community in Sweden reported closer social proximity with the members of the arriving community ( $t(1275) = -9.13, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = [0.52, 0.81]$ ) than older respondents. Moreover, these analyses showed that host nationals with a migration background, compared to those of native origin, reported lower levels of perceiving refugees as a symbolic threat ( $t(1218) = -2.96, p < 0.01, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = [-0.36, -0.07]$ ) and higher levels of readiness to assist them ( $t(1216) = -3.25, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = [-0.34, -0.08]$ ). At the same time, we found no differences in our main variables in relations to the respondents' marital or employment status.

We also conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs with Sheffe post hoc tests to analyse the potential differences in the host community members' positive opinions of refugees' impact, their feelings of social proximity with newcomers, threat perceptions and readiness to assist with regards to their educational level, political orientation, city of residence, and skill level. The results showed that left-wing supporters had higher levels of positive opinions of the refugees' impact ( $F(2, 1134) = 205.388, p < 0.001$ ), closer social proximity ( $F(2, 1137) = 76.175, p < 0.001$ ), and readiness to assist ( $F(2, 1134) = 112.782, p < 0.001$ ), as well as lower levels of symbolic ( $F(2, 1134) = 187.869, p < 0.001$ ) and realistic threats ( $F(2, 1136) = 217.372, p < 0.001$ ), compared with centre and right-wing supporters. In addition, host community members in Malmö had higher levels of symbolic threat perceptions ( $F(2, 1274) = 5.036, p < 0.01$ ) than their counterparts in Stockholm. Furthermore, respondents with tertiary education reported higher levels of positive opinions of the refugees' impact ( $F(2, 1263) = 7.590, p < 0.001$ ) and readiness to assist ( $F(2, 1263) = 7.446, p < 0.001$ ) and lower levels of symbolic ( $F(2, 1264) = 12.752, p < 0.001$ ) and realistic threats ( $F(2, 1264) = 9.356, p < 0.001$ ) compared with those who did not have tertiary education as their highest educational level. At the same time, we found no differences in our main variables in relation to the respondents' skill levels.

### *Mediation Analyses*

First, we ran a regression analysis including all our demographic variables at Step 1 and positive opinions of refugees' impact as an independent variable at Step 2. The analysis showed that positive opinions of refugees' impact were significantly and positively related to host nationals' readiness to assist them ( $b = 0.64, SE = 0.03, t = 20.14, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = [0.58, 0.71]$ ). Next, we tested whether social proximity mediates the relationship between positive opinions of the refugees' impact and readiness to assist, using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes 2022). This model specifically examined the direct and indirect

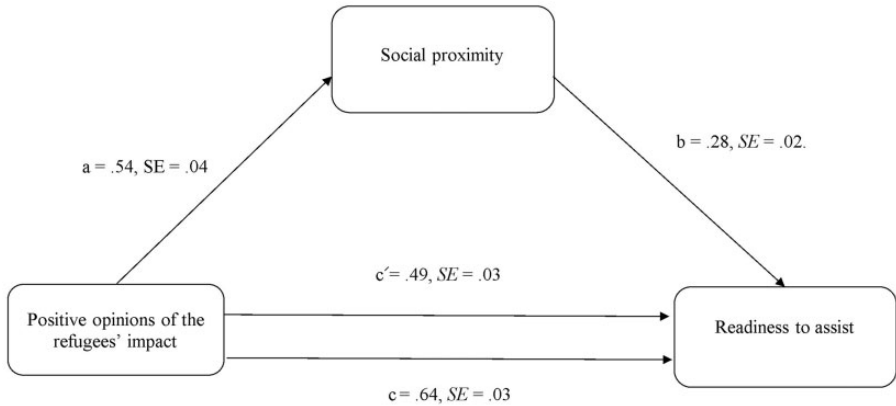


Figure 2.

### The Mediated Model for the Readiness to Assist

effects of host nationals' positive opinions of the refugees' impact on their readiness to assist newcomers through their social proximity to refugees.

The mediation analyses showed that positive opinions of the refugees' impact had an indirect effect on host nationals' readiness to assist them through its association with their social proximity ( $R^2 = 0.44$ ,  $F(9, 1037) = 91.31$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). As shown in Figure 2, positive opinions of the refugees' impact were significantly and positively associated with social proximity (path a;  $b = 0.54$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t = 12.93$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95 per cent CI = [0.46, 0.63]) and social proximity was significantly and positively associated with readiness to assist refugees (path b;  $b = 0.28$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $t = 12.79$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95 per cent CI = [0.24, 0.32]). In addition, positive opinions of the refugees' impact were found to have a significant and direct effect on host nationals' readiness to assist (path c';  $b = 0.49$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t = 15.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95 per cent CI = [0.43, 0.55]). Furthermore, positive opinions of the refugees' impact were found to have a significant indirect effect on readiness to assist through social proximity ( $b = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95 per cent CI = [0.12, 0.19]). Finally, the total effect (path c) of the positive opinions of the refugees' impact on readiness to assist was also found to be significant ( $b = 0.64$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t = 20.14$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95 per cent CI = [0.58, 0.71]). Overall, the results suggest that the link between positive opinions of the refugees' impact and readiness to assist them was partially mediated by the host nationals' social proximity to newcomers.

### Moderated Mediation Analyses

Second, we explored the moderating roles of symbolic and realistic threats in the previously tested mediation model—using Model 10 of the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes 2022)—and, specifically, their effects on the relationship between positive opinions of the refugees' impact and social proximity as well as on the relationship between positive opinions of the refugees' impact and readiness to

Table 1

<b>The Moderated Mediation Effects of Positive Opinions of Refugees' Impact on Readiness to Assist</b>						
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
Outcome: social proximity						
Predictors						
Age	-0.02	0.00	-8.04	0.00	-0.03	-0.02
Gender	-0.24	0.06	-3.87	0.00	-0.36	-0.12
City	0.01	0.03	0.24	0.81	-0.06	0.08
Migration background	0.00	0.07	-0.03	0.97	-0.13	0.13
Education	0.00	0.07	0.02	0.98	-0.14	0.15
Employment	0.00	0.08	-0.01	0.99	-0.16	0.16
Political orientation	-0.10	0.04	-2.20	0.03	-0.18	-0.01
Income	0.00	0.00	-0.91	0.36	0.00	0.00
Impact	0.17	0.06	2.94	0.00	0.06	0.28
Symbolic threat	-0.17	0.05	-3.15	0.00	-0.27	-0.06
Realistic threat	-0.23	0.06	-4.13	0.00	-0.34	-0.12
Impact × symbolic threat	-0.01	0.06	-0.14	0.89	-0.12	0.10
Impact × realistic threat	0.25	0.06	4.49	0.00	0.14	0.36
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>				0.39*		
<i>F</i>				50.54		
Outcome: readiness to assist						
Predictors						
Age	0.00	0.00	1.67	0.09	0.00	0.01
Gender	0.30	0.05	6.47	0.00	0.21	0.39
City	0.01	0.03	0.56	0.58	-0.04	0.06
Migration background	0.24	0.05	4.91	0.00	0.15	0.34
Education	0.06	0.05	1.11	0.27	-0.05	0.17
Employment	0.00	0.06	-0.07	0.94	-0.12	0.12
Political orientation	-0.06	0.03	-1.91	0.06	-0.12	0.00
Income	0.00	0.00	1.47	0.14	0.00	0.00
Impact	0.36	0.04	8.39	0.00	0.28	0.44
Social proximity	0.24	0.02	10.43	0.00	0.20	0.29
Symbolic threat	-0.11	0.04	-2.84	0.00	-0.19	-0.03
Realistic threat	-0.06	0.04	-1.51	0.13	-0.15	0.02
Impact × symbolic threat	-0.06	0.04	-1.33	0.18	-0.14	0.03
Impact × realistic threat	0.10	0.04	2.50	0.01	0.02	0.19
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>				0.53*		
<i>F</i>				83.60		

Notes: Gender was coded as '0' = male and '1' = female. City was coded as '11' = Gothenburg, '12' = Malmö, and '13' = Stockholm. Migration background was coded as '0' = no migration background and '1' = migration background. Education was coded as '1' = primary, '2' = secondary, and '3' = tertiary. Employment was coded as '0' = unemployed and '1' = employed. Political orientation was coded as '1' = left, '2' = centre, and '3' = right. Bootstrap sample size = 5000. CI, confidence interval; LL, low limit; UL, upper limit.

\* $p < 0.001$ .

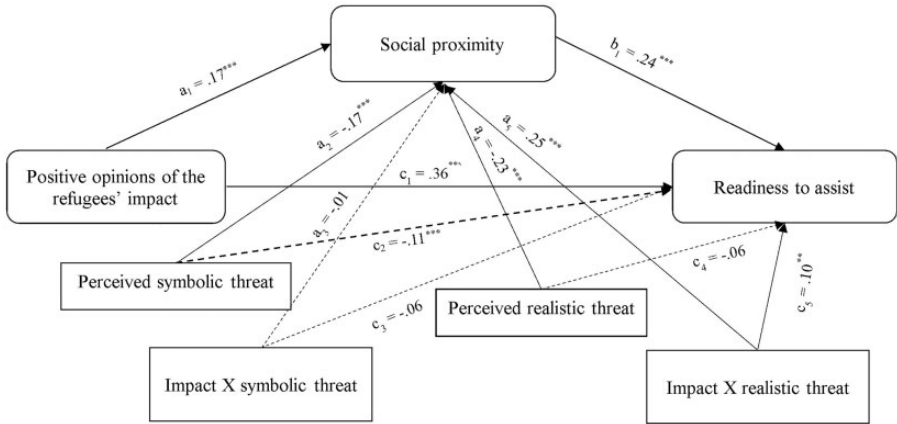
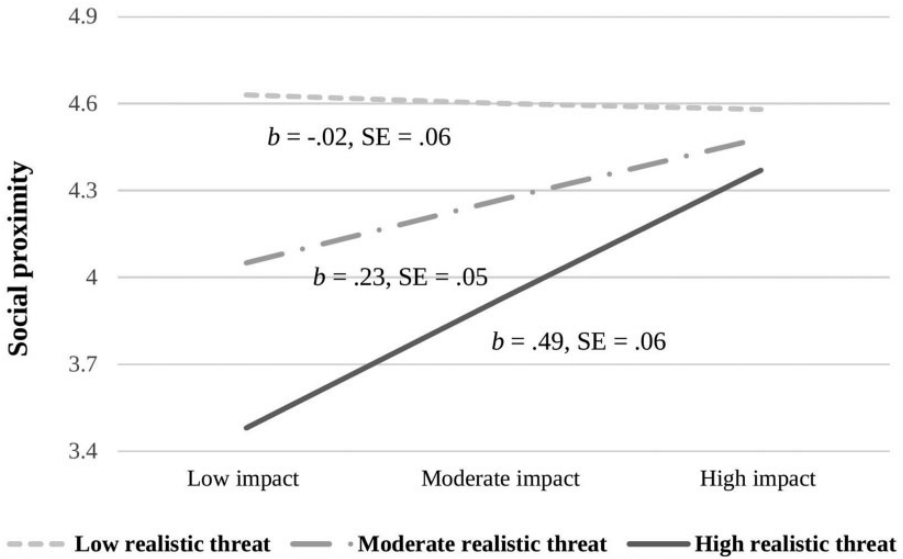


Figure 3. **Moderated Mediation Model for the Readiness to Assist. Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $< 0.01$**

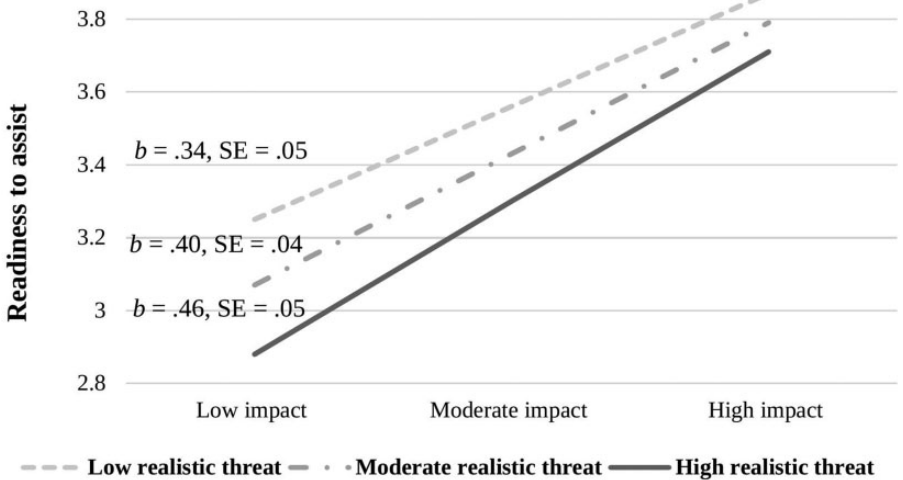
assist them. The results revealed that the interaction between positive opinions of the refugees' impact and symbolic threat did not significantly predict either social proximity or host nationals' readiness to assist refugees (see Table 1 and Figure 3). At the same time, the moderated mediation analyses (see Table 1 and Figure 3) showed that the interaction between positive opinions of the refugees' positive impact and realistic threat was positively and significantly related to both social proximity ( $b = 0.25, p < 0.001, 95$  per cent CI = [0.14, 0.36]) and host nationals' readiness to assist refugees ( $b = 0.10, p < 0.01, 95$  per cent CI = [0.02, 0.19]).

Follow-up simple slope tests indicated that positive opinions of the refugees' impact were significantly and positively related to host nationals' social proximity to refugees at high (i.e. 1 SD above the mean) and moderate (i.e. the mean) levels of realistic threat ( $b = 0.59, 95$  per cent CI = [0.37, 0.62] and  $b = 0.23, 95$  per cent CI = [0.13, 0.34], respectively) but not at low levels (i.e. 1 SD below the mean;  $b = -0.02, 95$  per cent CI = [-0.15, 0.10]). At the same time, post hoc analyses revealed that this effect was stronger (according to a Fisher  $r$ -to- $z$  transformation;  $z = 6.82, p < 0.001$ ) for host nationals with high levels of realist threat perceptions (see Figure 4). In addition, the results revealed that positive opinions of the refugees' impact on host nationals' readiness to assist newcomers were significant at high ( $b = 0.46, 95$  per cent CI = [0.36, 0.554]), moderate ( $b = 0.409, 95$  per cent CI = [0.32, 0.48]), and low levels of realistic threat ( $b = 0.34, 95$  per cent CI = [0.25, 0.43]). Yet, post hoc analyses showed that this effect was the most strongly related (according to a Fisher  $r$ -to- $z$  transformation;  $z = 1.96, p < 0.05$ ) to readiness to assist for those host nationals who reported high levels of realistic threat (see Figure 5).

Furthermore, the analyses demonstrated that realistic threat significantly moderated the indirect effect of positive opinions of the refugees' impact on readiness to assist through social proximity (index of moderated mediation model = 0.06,



**Figure 4.**  
**Moderation Effect of Realistic Threat on the Relationship Between Perceptions of the Positive Impact of Refugees and Social Proximity**



**Figure 5.**  
**Moderation Effect of Realistic Threat on the Relationship Between Perceptions of the Positive Impact of Refugees and Readiness to Assist**

SE = 0.01, 95 per cent CI = [0.04, 0.08]). Specifically, the inspection of the conditional indirect effect showed that positive opinions of the refugees' impact were significantly and positively related to social proximity and, in turn, readiness to



assist them at high and moderate levels of realistic threat ( $b_{\text{ind}} = 0.12$ , 95 per cent CI = [0.08, 0.17] and  $b_{\text{ind}} = 0.06$ , 95 per cent CI = [0.03, 0.09], respectively) but not at low levels ( $b_{\text{ind}} = -0.01$ , 95 per cent CI = [-0.03, 0.02]). In addition, post hoc analyses revealed that this moderating effect was stronger (according to a Fisher  $r$ -to- $z$  transformation;  $z = 1.64$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) for host nationals with high levels of realistic threat than for those with moderate levels. Taken together, these results suggest that positive opinions of the refugees' impact on the host society may potentially play a particularly important role in promoting closer social proximity to newcomers and, in turn, readiness to assist them for host nationals with high levels of perceiving refugees as a realistic threat.

## Discussion

Since the beginning of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, Western Europe—and Sweden in particular—has been the target destination for large inflows of refugees and migrants seeking sanctuary. Such an unprecedented influx of arriving community members has not only dominated headlines but has also prompted hot societal and political debate in receiving countries (Bevelander and Hollifield 2022). This highlights the importance of understanding the factors that might facilitate host community members' positive orientations towards newcomers, eventually contributing to their successful integration in receiving societies.

Consistent with prior research in the field (Guerra *et al.* 2015, 2016; Tartakovsky and Walsh 2016; Thravalou *et al.* 2021), we found that host nationals who reported more positive opinions of refugees' impact on society were also more likely to display more positive behavioural intentions and, in particular, a greater readiness to use their personal resources (e.g. attention, property, and time) to actively help arriving community members. What is more, the present study has provided initial evidence that social proximity might have an important role to play in mediating the relationship between host community members' positive opinions of the refugees' impact on society and their readiness to assist newcomers. More specifically, in line with our initial expectations, our findings showed that positive opinions of the refugees' impact were significantly and positively related to host nationals' feelings of social proximity with refugees and social proximity was found to be significantly and positively associated with readiness to assist newcomers. These findings suggest that positive perceptions of the arriving community's contribution to the host society might make host nationals more likely to engage in closer interpersonal relationships (e.g. family, love, and friendship) with refugees which, in turn, might lead to a higher propensity to display positive behavioural orientations towards this group and, particularly, to assist them personally. The results contribute to prior research emphasizing the important role of positive public opinions on the consequences of migration and incoming refugees in reducing social distance with the arriving community (e.g. Guerra *et al.* 2015; Koc and Anderson 2018) as well as the importance of social proximity in promoting positive outgroup orientations (Ajduković *et al.* 2019; Boulu-Reshef and Schulhofer-Wohl 2019).

An important contribution of the present study is the finding that host nationals' perceptions of the realistic threat imposed by refugees moderated the indirect effect of positive opinions of the arriving community's impact on their readiness to assist newcomers via social proximity. In particular, our study showed that positive opinions of the refugees' impact were positively related to social proximity and, in turn, readiness to assist them, among individuals with high and moderate levels of realistic threat—but not among those with low levels of realistic threat perceptions. In other words, host nationals who reported high and moderate levels of realistic threat from refugees also reported closer social proximity and greater readiness to assist newcomers when their opinions of the refugees' contributions to the host society were higher. These relationships, however, were stronger for host community members with high levels of realistic threat. This finding supports the premises of the threat–benefit model (Tartakovsky and Walsh 2016) postulating that arriving community members might be seen as simultaneously threatening and beneficial to the host society, both in several specific domains and in general. Although our findings should be interpreted with caution due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, our study suggests that viewing refugees as contributing economically to the host community may play a particularly important role in facilitating closer social proximity and positive behavioural intentions among those host nationals who view them as a realistic threat. This finding also adds to a mounting body of empirical research providing consistent evidence that positive intergroup experiences may be particularly effective and beneficial for individuals high in threat-driven collective security and social-cohesion motivation (i.e. right-wing authoritarians—see Dhont *et al.* 2011; Asbrock *et al.* 2012; Kteily *et al.* 2019). This is a particularly promising result given that it is threat-sensitive individuals who tend to be amongst the most prejudice-prone and resistant to change and, therefore, those who should be the most important to target in interventions and preventive programmes (Asbrock *et al.* 2012). It is possible that introducing host nationals (and in particular those who are prone to perceiving refugees as a realistic threat) to information about the potential economic contributions of arriving community members may prompt them to update their negative perceptions of refugees (e.g. 'Refugees will take away jobs, increase crime rates'), facilitate willingness to engage in close social relationships with them, and thus lead to them adapting positive behavioural intentions. Yet, to draw more robust conclusions, future longitudinal research with larger samples is needed to replicate the findings reported here as well as to verify and extend these potential explanations.

Contrary to our expectations, symbolic threat was not found to moderate the indirect effect of positive opinions of the arriving community's impact on their readiness to assist newcomers via social proximity. This finding might imply that viewing refugees as contributing to the host community is equally effective and beneficial for all host nationals in Sweden, irrespective of their levels of symbolic threat perception. In other words, it can potentially promote positive behavioural intentions towards newcomers through closer social proximity across various levels of the host community members' levels of symbolic threat. This finding can be also related to the fact that symbolic threats may have played a more significant role in

determining behavioural orientations among members of the host community in Sweden. For instance, recent research (Berry *et al.* 2016; Hovden *et al.* 2018) showed that the populist discourse and press in Sweden were more likely to frame Syrian refugees as a potential cultural threat (e.g. concerns about cultural differences, population strain) than realist threats (e.g. terrorism, crime, and economic burden). In addition, the mean levels of symbolic threat perceptions ( $M = 3.10$ ) in our sample were higher than the mean values of realistic threat perceptions ( $M = 2.49$ ). Therefore, the absence of interaction effects between the positive opinions of refugees' impact and social threat might indicate that viewing arriving community members as contributing to society might have just as strong beneficial implications for individuals with both high and low levels of symbolic threat perceptions. Nevertheless, future research applying more comprehensive measures or experimental design might shed light on the unique effects of positive opinions of the refugees' impact on host nationals' positive behavioural orientations across individuals with different levels of symbolic threat.

### Limitations and Future Directions

The present study contributes to the understanding of positive opinions of the refugees' impact on the host society and its relationship with host nationals' willingness to assist newcomers as well as the mechanisms that underlie this relationship. Several limitations of the study, however, need to be addressed. First, the present study was based on a cross-sectional, correlational design that cannot provide strong evidence of a causal relationship between the variables or verify the true mediation and moderations effects. Therefore, future longitudinal research is needed to clarify and further test the mediated and moderated relationships proposed and found in the present study. Second, our instruments were based on self-reported measures, which might have exposed the study to the limitations of mono-method bias as well as to the potential issues of social desirability. In addition, in our study, we assessed host nationals' positive behavioural intentions towards refugees, rather than their *actual* behaviour. Future studies should examine host nationals' positive behaviour directly using vignette or experimental designs to examine the robustness of these effects.

Third, the present study is based on data collected in Sweden and might not be translatable to other refugee-receiving countries. Countries differ in a number of important aspects, including economic conditions, political climate, the share of immigrant-origin population, migration, and integration policies (e.g. Mephram and Verkuyten 2017; Ma-Kellams 2018; Heizmann and Huth 2021). These differences might have a significant role to play in understanding the relationship between positive opinions of refugees' impact on the host community and host nationals' positive behavioural intentions towards newcomers. For instance, receiving-society members in economically prosperous countries like Sweden and Germany might be more inclined to evaluate the economic impact of refugees more positively and thus might be more prone to assist newcomers. However, the perceptions of refugees as an economic threat might be more pronounced in countries with a more-fragile

economic situation and high unemployment rates—such as Croatia and Jordan. Relatedly, the host population in countries with a small share of minority groups—such as Croatia and Hungary—might be more likely to view refugees and, in particular, those of Muslim origin, as imposing a threat to their culture and traditions. Therefore, the role of symbolic threat in the studied relationship might differ between the host nationals of these countries and those residing in Sweden. Thus, the findings reported here need to be cross-validated in other national and cultural contexts as well as expanded in cross-country comparative research.

It would also be interesting for future work to examine the relationship between positive opinions of the refugees' impact on the receiving society and host nationals' positive behavioural intentions towards them, simultaneously accounting for various constructs associated with intergroup bias. For instance, a recent study by [Kteily et al. \(2019\)](#) showed that greater quality contact with African Americans was associated with lower levels of intergroup hostility among White Americans at both lower and higher levels of ideological (SDO, right-wing authoritarianism), cognitive style (need for closure), and identity-based (group identification) indicators of prejudice proneness. It would be informative to further examine whether viewing refugees as contributing to society has similar positive implications for promoting a willingness to assist arriving communities among individuals with high vs low levels of other individual differences in prejudice proneness. Relatedly, given the important role of the socio-economic status in shaping attitudes towards arriving communities ([Coenders et al. 2004](#); [Abdelaaty and Steele 2022](#)), it would be highly informative to the literature to examine whether the relationship between positive perceptions of refugees' impact on the host society and host nationals' positive behaviour towards them differs among individuals with different socio-economic statuses.

### **Supplemental Material**

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *Journal of Refugee Studies* online.

### **Data Availability**

Due to privacy and ethical concerns, supporting data are not available.

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ENDNOTE

1. The 2022 elections show that the party has further increased its support to 20.6 per cent of the votes and become the second-largest party in Sweden after the Social Democrats.

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