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# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL AND PERSONAL NORMS OF MAJORITY CHILDREN IN PREDICTING ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEE PEERS

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Norms have been shown to predict a variety of intergroup outcomes among children. A study with children in Croatia ( $N = 184$ ) who had no prior contact with refugee peers examined the role of social and personal norms in shaping intergroup outcomes with refugee peers. Regression analyses revealed that perceived teachers' and peers' norms, along with personal norms, predict general evaluation, social acceptance, and contact intentions towards refugee children. Social norms, especially those of teachers, were found to better predict attitudes, while peer norms more strongly influenced behavioural outcomes. These findings are important for educators and policy-makers, particularly in the context of Croatia's increasingly diverse classrooms.

Keywords: attitudes towards refugees, social norms, personal norm, intergroup relations, refugee children



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## INTRODUCTION

Social norms are among the strongest regulators of human behaviour. They could be defined as unwritten rules, standards and expectations of normal or appropriate attitudes and beha-

viours within a social group (Stok & de Ridder, 2019). Cialdini and colleagues (1991) distinguished between two types of norms: descriptive (what members of a social group are doing) and prescriptive or injunctive norm (what people should or should not do). Building on this distinction, Lapinski and Rimal (2005) added that norms can be observed as collective norms (code of conduct of a group, community or culture) and perceived norms (individual's understanding and perceptions of these collective norms).

Social norms have been shown to predict a variety of negative and positive intergroup outcomes. For example, Crandall and colleagues (2002) found that people are more likely to show prejudice towards different outgroups if members of their in-group approve it. On the brighter side, Meleady (2021) found that people were more likely to show intention for contact when they knew that a high proportion of their in-group members had contact with immigrants.

In this paper, we are particularly interested in social norms as predictors of children's attitudes toward their refugee peers. Therefore, we continue by briefly presenting research showing the role of social norms in intergroup attitudes of children, specifically towards refugee children.

Research on children and adolescents has focused primarily on normative sources from family, school and friends, often combining or comparing them together or along with additional sources of broader social context influences, such as media or socioeconomic background (Ata et al., 2009; Mähönen et al., 2010; Miklikowska, 2017). In this regard, research has found that norms are perceived as a dynamic process that can change with changes in context (Tankard & Paluck, 2016). Therefore, we will be focusing on norms in the school context, specifically on the normative sources within the classroom (i.e. peers and teachers), as this is the place where children have the opportunity for regular contact, once a refugee child joins the class. As integration is defined as a two-way process, to be successful, both refugee and host communities need to contribute and adapt in the process. The host community's responsibility is to ensure a friendly and welcoming atmosphere that helps prevent negative attitudes and behaviours, and implementation of preparatory activities is critical in the process of helping domicile students to adapt and welcome their refugee peers. School can thus be both a protective (ensures safety, motivation, relationships, and support) and a risk factor (rigid bureaucratic structures with harsh and exclusionary discipline) in the lives of both refugee and domicile children (Osher et al., 2014).

Research shows that the school environment, the relationship with teachers, peer norms and networks as well as the role of parents' and peer relationships outside of school are impor-

tant in developing interethnic acceptance (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014). It was also shown that different aspects of school experiences, including those normative such as a cooperative classroom climate (Miklikowska et al., 2021), prevented the development of anti-immigrant attitudes in adolescents. Indeed, a democratic classroom climate and supportive relations to classmates can prevent the development of anti-immigrant attitudes even in a less diverse context (Eckstein et al., 2021).

Besides showing that various aspects of classroom characteristics can prevent anti-immigrant attitudes, research by Miklikowska and colleagues (2019) showed that classroom diversity, along with peer and parental anti-immigrant attitudes, predicts children's anti-immigrant attitudes. This longitudinal study identified that adolescents whose peers and parents showed more anti-immigrant attitudes showed themselves this kind of anti-immigrant attitudes. Interestingly, the changes in adolescents' anti-immigrant attitudes were positively related to peer but not parental anti-immigrant attitudes. Moreover, a diverse classroom can suppress parental anti-immigrant attitudes.

Similarly, Tropp and her colleagues (2016) compared simultaneously the role of peer and school norms in predicting intergroup outcomes in two studies with a cross-sectional and a longitudinal design. In both studies the perceived school norms (teachers and principal's) and peer norms were operationalised as the approval and value of intergroup friendship for four positive intergroup outcomes (comfort with out-group members, quality of interethnic contact, interest in cross-ethnic friendship and current cross-ethnic friendships). Results from the cross-sectional study showed that both peer and school norms significantly predicted comfort with out-group members, quality of interethnic contact and interest in cross-ethnic friendship. Additionally, peer norms also predicted current cross-group friendships. In the longitudinal study, however, school norms were significant predictors only for interest in cross-group friendship, while peer norms remained significant for all outcomes. Similarly, using the same measures of perceived peer and school norms, McKeown and Taylor (2018) tested a mediation model of quality and quantity of contact as mediators of the relationship between these norms and prosocial and sectarian antisocial behaviour in Northern Ireland. Results showed that peer norms had a direct effect on both mediators (quality and quantity of contact) and on the positive (prosocial behaviour) but not the negative outcome (sectarian antisocial behaviour). Furthermore, indirect effects of peer norms on prosocial behaviour (mediated by quality and quantity of contact and sectarian antisocial behaviour through quality of contact) were found. Nevertheless, school norms showed no direct or indirect effect on any of the outcomes. A recent study

in Croatia also confirmed different predictive power of different social norms (peer, parental and school) in predicting in-group bias, discrimination tendencies towards out-group members, social distance and prosocial behaviour (Pehar et al., 2020). While peer and parental norms were significant predictors of all measured outcomes, school norms significantly predicted behavioural tendencies (discrimination tendencies and prosocial behaviour), but not attitudes. The presented studies show that social norms predict various forms of attitudes and different behavioural outcomes. Moreover, they shed light on the relative contributions of different social norms and emphasise the significance of peer norms in the lives of children and adolescents, i.e., all the studies indicated that peer norms were more consistent predictors of intergroup outcomes compared to school norms.

The influence of others is significant not only in shaping attitudes and behaviours but also in shaping personal norms of how to behave or feel towards oneself and others. Schwartz (1977) defined personal norms as a sense of moral obligation or expectation that an individual has of himself/herself about how he/she should act in a particular situation. Therefore, personal norms are sometimes also referred to as moral norms.

Children try to internalise messages from their social environment, including the ones related to members of out-groups. This internalisation results from the child's understanding of how his/her group generally behaves, e.g. justly or unjustly, and therefore, what moral principles the group practises when it relates to others. Consequently, an indicator of the child's intergroup norm can be his/her norm of moral exclusion, i.e., a belief of whether it is morally acceptable to exclude out-group members based only on their group membership.

As suggested by the Social Reasoning Developmental perspective (SRD; Rutland et al., 2010), decision-making in children and adolescents is influenced by two mutually intertwined processes, i.e., morality principles and group processes. Previous research has shown that morality develops simultaneously with awareness of social identities and group identification, which makes understanding the phenomenon of social exclusion in children more complex (Killen & Rutland, 2011). Children consider group functioning and moral reasoning when making decisions about the social exclusion of others (Sims & Killen, 2020). Moreover, according to the SRD, group norms are heavily determined by contextual and cultural factors (Killen et al., 2015). An example of how different contextual factors can determine social exclusion and inclusion was shown in a study with German adolescents looking at willingness to include a German peer and a Syrian refugee in leisure-time

activities. The results showed that adolescents were equally prone to including a German peer and a Syrian refugee. However, they were less inclusive towards a Syrian refugee with poor language skills, highlighting that other reasons, such as language skills, could be more important than the other group identity features when making decisions about social inclusion and exclusion (Beißert et al., 2020). Furthermore, research showed that children who have contact with members of the out-group show less prejudice and use moral reasoning to justify the wrongfulness of intergroup social exclusion (Killen, 2007). Recent studies of moral exclusion have focused on peers that challenge group norms, showing that, in general, children prefer inclusion over exclusion as a normative behaviour. More specifically, children tend to exclude peers that promote exclusion of out-group peers, while challenging norms of exclusion and advocating inclusion is seen as acceptable behaviour (Hitti & Killen, 2022).

Overall, research suggests that various perceived social and personal norms have important roles in shaping intergroup attitudes, including those towards refugees and migrants. Perceived social norms may influence attitudes by providing a sense of what is socially acceptable or unacceptable, while personal norms may influence attitudes by reflecting an individual's own moral principles and values. Furthermore, when multiple norms are present in a context, the most salient norm will define the behaviour (Stok & de Ridder, 2019). Therefore, we wanted to explore the predictive power of social norms related to the school context and personal norm of exclusion for three intergroup outcomes related to refugee children in Croatia.

## STUDY AIM

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This study aimed to examine the role of perceived social and personal norms in predicting intergroup outcomes towards refugee children. Specifically, we wanted to examine to what extent perceived teachers' and peer norms about contact with refugee peers, as well as personal norm about relations with refugee peers, predict three intergroup outcomes ranging from an overall attitude (of general evaluation of refugees) to more behavioural-oriented outcomes (e.g. social acceptance of refugees and contact intention with refugees), in a context where host-society children had no contact with refugee children. The novelty of this study is in simultaneously comparing the relative importance of two different sources of social norms and a personal norm in predicting three intergroup outcomes related to refugee children, i.e., attitudes and behavioural intentions.

## Social context of the study

During and after the Homeland War there were studies conducted on attitudes towards refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) from the neighbouring countries (Magdalenić, 1992; Bulat, 1995; Čolić & Sujoldžić, 1995), as well as the living conditions of these children in Croatia (Brčić & Dumančić, 1992).

However, since the closure of the Balkan route in 2016 and the start of refugee children attending Croatian schools, there is no available data on the attitudes of primary school children from the host-society of attitudes towards refugee peers. Until recently, only a few schools in Croatia had at least limited experience in integrating refugee children from other cultural backgrounds, and those schools were primarily in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. However, the situation with integrating refugees is changing and Croatian schools are becoming more diverse. To prevent potential negative attitudes of the majority towards refugees and to be able to implement preparation activities to welcome refugees, it is only a necessary step to learn about prevailing attitudes of domicile children in schools.

To our knowledge, this is the first quantitative study on attitudes towards refugees from other cultures conducted with children in Croatia. We wanted to choose a study site where children were aware of the presence of refugees in the country, but it was not likely that they had had any contact with refugees yet. Therefore, we conducted a study in April 2021 in a primary school in Osijek, Croatia. Though no refugees were settled in the city at the time, nor the city schools had experience in refugee children integration, topics on refugees and migrations had been present in the public discourse from the "migration crisis" in 2015 and hence among the children as well. Moreover, the region suffered tremendous destruction during the 1991–1995 war in Croatia, and many families had lived through the experience of being refugees themselves. Because of all these factors, Osijek was chosen as the city for conducting the present study.

## METHODS

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### Participants

Participants in this study were 184 majority children enrolled in 2nd (28%), 3rd (33%), 4th (22%) and 6th (17%) grades in one public elementary school in Osijek. The pupils' age ranged from 8 to 13 years ( $M = 9.65$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ). The sample was gender-balanced with 52% of girls participating in the study.

## Design and procedure

We conducted a survey in a classroom setting. The questionnaire addressing pupils' attitudes towards refugee children was administered during regular classes and required approximately 30 minutes. A joint instruction was given at the beginning to explain the study's aim in an age-appropriate manner. In our research, refugee children were defined as *children who had to leave their country because they were in danger because of war and this is why they are looking for protection in other safe countries, including Croatia*. To clarify potential misunderstandings, children were encouraged to ask questions after the definition of a refugee child was given.

Afterwards, the researchers continued to read through the questionnaire in lower grades (up to grade 4), leading the pupils from item to item to make sure everybody understood their task. Pupils in higher grades (in grade 6) read the questionnaire by themselves.

The IRB of the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb approved the study. Written parental consent was obtained for all participants via letters sent through the school. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

## Measures

Children responded to items about three intergroup outcomes related to refugee children: general evaluation, social acceptance, and contact intentions. Social norms were defined as perceived teachers' and peer norm about approving and supporting contact with refugee children, while personal norm was defined as perceived "wrongfulness" of excluding a refugee child from a social event with peers.

### Three intergroup outcomes

A general evaluation of refugees was assessed using a single item, asking participants for their general opinion of refugee children on a scale from 0 (*very poor*) to 10 (*very good*). A higher score indicated a more positive attitude towards refugee children.

Social acceptance was derived from the social distance scale adapted from Maričić et al. (2012). Nine items were used, asking children to assess acceptability of different forms of relationships with refugee children (*I would accept a refugee child to live in my town, live in my street, go to my school, go to my class, sit next to me in class, work with me on a school task, hang out with me outside of school, visit me at home and be my best friend*). The total score was formed as a sum of items, with a higher score indicating greater social acceptance of refugee children.

Contact intention with refugee children was assessed using an adapted version of a 3-item scale previously used in similar research with children (Cameron et al., 2006; Vezzali et al., 2012). Participants assessed whether they would initiate contact (*introduce themselves, hang out and have ice cream*) with an unknown refugee child they had just met at the park (e.g. *I would approach that child and introduce myself*) from 1 (*not agree at all*) to 5 (*totally agree*). The total score is the average of all items on the scale. A higher result means a higher intention to achieve contact. The reliability of the scale was high ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

### Norms

Perceived social norms of contact with refugee children were assessed using subscales of teacher and peer norms adapted from study 1 of Tropp et al. (2016). Each subscale consisted of two items that assess the hypothetical expectations of teachers and peers about helping and making friends with refugee children (e.g. *If refugee children attended my school, a) it would be important for my teachers/my peers that we help them and b) my teachers/my peers would want us to become friends with them*). A higher score indicates a perception of a more positive norm of contact with refugee children. The Spearman-Brown coefficient showed a satisfactory reliability of the two-item subscale for teachers' ( $SB = 0.69$ ) and peer norms ( $SB = 0.88$ ). The Pearson's coefficient was statistically significant in both, peer ( $r = 0.789$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and teacher norms ( $r = 0.531$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ).

Personal norm was assessed with a newly constructed scale of moral exclusion. The measure consists of three statements in which children were asked to evaluate hypothetical situations where in-group peers excluded a refugee child from a social event (*if a refugee child was not invited to a) hang out after school, b) go to a birthday and c) join a group on social network, because he or she is a refugee*) on a scale from 1 (*very bad*) to 5 (*very good*). Children's reasoning about moral exclusion was considered as a proxy of personal norm about relations with refugee peers. The items were recoded so the lower result on moral exclusion indicated a more positive personal norm. Hence, a higher score indicated a more favourable personal norm towards refugees. The items form a reliable scale ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

We performed parallel analysis for all the multi-item scales except for the social acceptance as a binary scale where we applied the 'eigenvalue higher than one' rule. All the multi-item scales, including social acceptance, showed a unidimensional structure.

To ensure that the questionnaire is age-appropriate, we conducted four cognitive interviews with children from 2nd and 3rd grade.



## RESULTS

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Three types of intergroup outcomes towards refugee children (general evaluation, social acceptance, and contact intention) were regressed on perceived social norms and personal norm relating to refugee peers while controlling the age and gender of the participants. Descriptive statistics of all the variables are presented in Table 1. The results on all outcome and predictor variables in our sample are in the upper part of the theoretical range showing that, in general, pupils positively evaluate refugee peers, accept social relations with them and are willing to engage in contact with them in the future. On the social acceptance scale, most of the children would accept all kinds of relationships with a refugee peer. The results show that 67,6% of the sample would accept a refugee child as their best friend, while 68,3% would accept sitting together in class, 69,7% visiting at home, 80,9% working together on a school task, 81,5% in the same class, 83,7% outside of school, 85,9% live in the same street, 89,1% in their school and 95,7% in their city. Furthermore, perceived social norms and personal norm are positive, indicating that children expect their teachers and peers to encourage and support contact with refugee peers. The children also consider it wrong to exclude a peer solely based on his or her refugee status.

Next, correlations between all variables are presented in Table 1. Although positive, the correlations among the three outcome variables are weak to moderate (ranging from  $r = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.001$  to  $r = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and have slightly different correlation patterns with the predictor variables. Therefore, it is justified to consider them as three distinct intergroup outcomes. Furthermore, all three types of intergroup outcomes positively correlate with the perceived social norms and personal norm. Children who perceive their teachers' and peer norms more positively and have a more positive personal norm, also evaluate refugee children more positively, are more open to having closer relationships with refugee children and more willing to initiate contact with a refugee child in the future. Looking into more detail, all three outcomes are only weakly correlated with personal norm (general evaluation:  $r = 0.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , social acceptance:  $r = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and contact intention:  $r = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). On the contrary, the correlations of the outcomes with social norms are higher and show more variability. While the general evaluation is weakly correlated with both social norms (teachers:  $r = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and peer norms:  $r = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), social acceptance shows a moderate correlation with teachers' ( $r = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and a weak correlation with peer norms ( $r = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while contact intentions show a moderate correlation with teachers' norms ( $r = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ),

and a high correlation with peer norms ( $r = 0.61, p < 0.001$ ). As for the relationship between outcomes and control sociodemographic variables, age is only weakly correlated with contact intention ( $r = -0.18, p = 0.013$ ), indicating that younger children are more willing to engage in contact with refugee children in the future. The correlation of age with general evaluation ( $r = 0.02, p = 0.807$ ) and social acceptance ( $r = 0.07, p = 0.387$ ) was not significant.

In contrast, gender is weakly positively correlated with the general evaluation ( $r = 0.21, p = 0.004$ ) and social acceptance ( $r = 0.34, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that girls show a more positive general attitude and more social acceptance towards refugee peers than boys, while the correlation with contact intention ( $r = 0.15, p = 0.055$ ) was not statistically significant.

TABLE 1  
Correlations, means  
and standard  
deviations of  
measured variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	SD	N
1 General evaluation	-	0.39**	0.31**	0.02	0.21**	0.33**	0.30**	0.26**	7.4	2.3	183
2 Social acceptance		-	0.47**	0.07	0.34**	0.41**	0.36**	0.29**	7.2	2.5	181
3 Contact intention			-	-0.18*	0.15	0.43**	0.61**	0.25**	3.9	1.2	180
4 Age				-	0.05	-0.06	-0.28**	-0.01	9.7	1.4	181
5 Gender <sup>a</sup>					-	0.13	0.11	0.17*	-	-	179
6 Teachers' norm						-	0.38**	0.17*	4.6	0.6	180
7 Peer norm							-	0.17*	4.0	1.1	179
8 Personal norm								-	4.6	0.8	177

<sup>a</sup>Male = 1 and Female = 2; \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Furthermore, we conducted three separate two-step hierarchical regression analyses for each of the three outcomes (Table 2). We simultaneously regressed all predictor variables onto the outcome variables in step 2 to examine the unique contribution of each, while controlling the age and gender in step 1.

Firstly, the general evaluation was regressed on perceived social norms (teachers' and peer norms) and personal norm while controlling for age and gender. As shown in Table 2, the control variables explained 4% of the variance of general evaluation in step 1. Only gender ( $\beta = 0.21, p = 0.006$ ) predicted the general evaluation, indicating that girls have a more positive attitude towards refugees than boys, while age was not predictive ( $\beta = -0.02, p = 0.773$ ). The perceived social norms and personal norm that were added in step 2 explained an additional 16% of the variance of general evaluation. The final model explained 20% of the variance of general evaluation and the final regression equation was statistically significant  $F(5,167) = 8.34, p < 0.001$ . By introducing norms in the second step, age ( $\beta = 0.04, p = 0.612$ ) and gender ( $\beta = 0.13, p = 0.073$ )

were no longer significant predictors. The best predictor in explaining the general evaluation were the teachers' norms ( $\beta = 0.24, p = 0.002$ ), followed by equally predictive peer norms ( $\beta = 0.17, p = 0.031$ ) and personal norm ( $\beta = 0.17, p = 0.020$ ). More positive norms of relating to refugee children predicted more positive general evaluations of refugee children.

Predictor variables		Outcome variables		
		General evaluation $\beta$	Social acceptance $\beta$	Contact intention $\beta$
Step 1	Age	-0.02	0.02	-0.21**
	Gender (F > M)	0.21**	0.35***	0.16*
	$R^2$ (Adj. $R^2$ )	0.04* (0.03)	0.12*** (0.11)	0.07** (0.06)
Step 2	Age	0.04	0.10	-0.07
	Gender (F > M)	0.13	0.25***	0.06
	Teachers' norms	0.24**	0.27***	0.22**
	Peer norms	0.17*	0.23**	0.47***
	Personal norm	0.17*	0.16*	0.11
	$R^2$ (Adj. $R^2$ )	0.20*** (0.18)	0.33*** (0.31)	0.43*** (0.41)
	$\Delta R^2$	0.16***	0.21***	0.36***

TABLE 2  
Summary results of three hierarchical regression analyses for variables predicting general evaluation, social acceptance and contact intention (N = 172)

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

To determine the extent to which the same predictors contribute to the variance of social acceptance, another hierarchical regression was performed. The results indicate that in step 1 age ( $\beta = 0.02, p = 0.762$ ) and gender ( $\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$ ) explained 12 % of the variance of social acceptance. Again, only gender was a significant predictor. The three norms added to the sociodemographic predictors in the second step, explaining an additional 21% of the variance of social acceptance. The final model was significant ( $F(5,166) = 16.51, p < 0.001$ ). Interestingly, gender remained a significant predictor ( $\beta = 0.25, p < 0.001$ ) in step 2, and together with norms explained 33% of the variance of social acceptance. Teachers' norms were again the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001$ ), followed by peer norms ( $\beta = 0.23, p = 0.002$ ), and personal norm ( $\beta = 0.16, p = 0.017$ ). Social norms and personal norm were positively associated with social acceptance, and girls were willing to engage in closer relationships with refugee children than their male peers.

Finally, a third hierarchical regression was performed to explore to what extent social norms and personal norm predict the intention of contact with refugee children when age and gender are controlled. In the first step, both age ( $\beta = -0.21, p = 0.005$ ) and gender ( $\beta = 0.16, p = 0.031$ ) were significant predictors, indicating that younger pupils and girls were more willing to engage in contact with refugee peers. The first step explained 7% of the variance of contact intention.

Adding norms in the second step again significantly improved the model by additional 36% of the variance explained. Overall, the model was significant ( $F(5,166) = 25.02, p < 0.001$ ) and explained a total amount of 43% of the variance of contact intention towards refugee children. As norms were added in the second step of the model, both of the sociodemographic variables became insignificant in predicting contact intentions (age:  $\beta = -0.07, p = 0.290$ , gender:  $\beta = 0.06, p = 0.354$ ). Perceived peer norms explain a large and significant amount of variance in contact intention ( $\beta = 0.47, p < 0.001$ ), followed by teachers' norms ( $\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$ ), while personal norm does not make a unique predictive contribution ( $\beta = 0.11, p = 0.072$ ). Interestingly, the unique contributions of social norms for contact intentions are different compared to general evaluation and social acceptance, where teachers' norms were stronger predictors than peer norms. Peer norms seem to be the key predictor of contact intentions.

## DISCUSSION

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To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study on primary school children's attitudes towards refugee peers since Croatia joined the EU and became more attractive to third-country nationals. We were interested particularly in this age group as primary school is compulsory for refugee children and therefore a place with the greatest chance for direct and regular contact with the host society. In general, children show positive results on all measures, i.e., they hold positive norms about relating with refugees and perceive that significant others (i.e. peers and teachers) also have positive social norms about it. Additionally, children's general attitudes and contact intentions are also clearly positive. Children were also ready to accept different social relations with their refugee peers: the acceptance rate was high for all relations included. As expected, more children accept distant relations than more close ones; nevertheless, the acceptance rate is fairly high even for the closest relations. These positive results indicate that preparatory activities for majority children to welcome their refugee peers when they arrive to their school could fall on fertile ground. Though we may not rule out the possibility that children's attitudes may be the result of social desirability more than their true (positive) attitudes, these results are in line with the moral exclusion framework (Killen, 2007), which suggests that children generally have positive out-group attitudes and avoid excluding out-group peers, unless a negative social norm prevails. Besides, since there has not been much recent experience with refugees in our research context, it is hard to say

that children would know beforehand what the socially desirable answers were.

Interestingly, the correlations between the three outcome measures were weak to moderate, highlighting the importance of including different indicators in assessing intergroup outcomes. The necessity of considering diverse outcomes in the study of intergroup relations is underscored by research conducted during and after the Homeland War. On the island of Hvar, Croatia, Čolić and Sujodžić (1995) observed that host-community members who interacted with IDPs and refugees reported positive direct contact. However, attitudes towards the long-term stay of IDPs and refugees varied, often highlighting socio-economic challenges as reasons against long-term integration. While the hosts were willing to befriend the newcomers, they were less inclined to accept them as neighbours on the social distance scale.

Bulat (1995) further demonstrated that attitudes were more favourable towards IDPs and refugees from the same ethnic group (Croats from Bosnia and Herzegovina), compared to those from different ethnic or religious groups, such as Muslims. This suggests that broader socio-economic variables significantly influence intergroup outcomes. Extending this research to children, future studies should consider factors such as perceived similarity with refugee children.

Magdalenić (1992) emphasised the importance of the timing of investigations, noting that initial interactions may differ from later ones as different intergroup concepts, such as solidarity fatigue, become more salient. This highlights the dynamic nature of intergroup relations and the need for longitudinal studies to capture these evolving perspectives.

Next, building on previous research on the relative contribution of norms to intergroup outcomes, we were interested in the extent to which perceived teachers' and peer norms as well as personal norm could explain the three intergroup outcomes of domicile children towards refugee children. To reiterate, the context of our study was such that children were not likely to have had any contact with refugees. Even in such a context, both perceived social norms contribute to the explained variance of all three intergroup outcomes, corroborating results of the cross-sectional study of Tropp et al. (2016), which showed that peer and school (teacher and principal) norms of contact were significant predictors of intergroup outcomes in children. However, when comparing the predictive power of social norms across outcomes, it seems they were not equally important. While teachers' norms explain equally the variance of all intergroup outcomes, peer norms seem differently important in determining different intergroup outcomes.

Peer norms were more predictive for more specific behavioural outcomes than for the general evaluation of refugees, suggesting that when it comes to more concrete behaviours, children turn to their peers and behave in line with their expectations. Hence, when comparing teacher and peer norms, it seems that teachers are more important for attitudinal, and peers for behavioural outcomes, indicating that peer pressure might be an important obstacle or indeed an important facilitator of willingness to initiate contact with refugee peers.

Second, unlike social norms, which were predictive for all the outcomes, personal norm was predictive for general evaluation and social acceptance but not for the intention to contact with refugee children. It is possible that children have internalised what would be morally correct, and their attitudes reflect these beliefs. However, more than internalisation is needed for contact intention. Therefore, our results may indicate that in a new situation demanding contact with an unknown refugee peer, children rely more on messages from their social environment than on their own norm of what is morally acceptable. This is a clear direction for possible school interventions – even when there are generally positive attitudes, children will be more confident in building relations with their refugee peers if their social environment supports and encourages them to do so.

In addition, the role of sociodemographic variables became irrelevant when the norms were included in the regression analysis models, except in the case of social acceptance. Here the results indicate that girls are more willing to accept closer relationships with refugee children than boys. Our results are in line with the study of Ata and colleagues (2009), showing that boys are more socially distant. It is possible that different socialisation practices for boys and girls are underlying mechanisms that produce such gender differences in accepting others. As previously shown, girls are usually more empathetic and are taught to be more inclusive and caring than boys (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2020).

Interestingly, focusing on the outcomes and comparing the percentage of explained variance, it seems that this set of norms is more predictive for behavioural than attitudinal outcomes altogether. Specifically, perceived teachers' and peer norms together with personal norm explain 20% of the variance of general evaluation, 33% of social acceptance and 43% of contact intention. Therefore, it is important to underline that norms seem to be the better predictors of behavioural outcomes than of general attitudes. Specifically, peer norms had the biggest unique contribution in predicting the contact intention as a proxy of behaviour. This finding may be well used

in planning preparation activities for children with no experience with refugee peers or in intervention programmes aimed to foster positive intergroup outcomes, e.g., by emphasising positive peer norms.

Unlike peer norms, teacher norms were more predictive of general evaluation and social acceptance. In the case of social acceptance, this finding holds true not only on the average results but also on the item level. We expand on this by investigating the relations between norms and social acceptance facets, showing that teachers are the most important normative sources for this variable, predicting even relationships outside the school context. Interestingly, these non-school-related relationships (city, street and best friends) were also predicted by the personal norm, indicating that personal norm (morality) aligns more with teachers' norms (authorities) than peer norms. In contrast, peer norms were predictive for one-on-one situations, which are relevant for peer context, regardless of location (both at home and at school).

Finally, we acknowledge that the format of the responses might also influence the results, as the theoretical variances were not equal on all measures. However, all the results were positive, regardless of the format. Furthermore, using single-item scales has become more acceptable in the last few years as their time efficacy and face validity is largely accepted by the participants (Allen et al., 2022).

### **Limitation and further research**

While we show that social and personal norms are quite good predictors of children's attitudes towards refugee peers, we acknowledge the limitations of our study design, since we conduct a cross-sectional study in a single school. Therefore, the results of our study, although being the first of this kind in the Croatian context, may be only indicative, and ask to include more participants and for more schools to answer the questions on what kind of attitudes children have towards their refugee peers. It is for further research to include bigger samples from various regions and contexts in the country (e.g., those more or less affected by the consequences of the Homeland war, including experiences with forced displacement, children with more opportunity for intergroup contact with refugees from other countries). Larger samples could also allow for using more advanced data analysis to control for clusterisation and other relevant contextual factors. Besides, including more schools is of the utmost importance, as the impact of the school climate on intergroup attitudes is well-known (Miklikowska et al., 2021; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014). This holds true not only where children have no contact with refugee

children, but also in schools that already have experience with the integration of refugees. Research showed that contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), especially cross-group friendships (Davies et al., 2013), plays a significant role in intergroup relations and promoting intergroup attitudes. Moreover, intergroup contact can also moderate the effects of social norms on intergroup outcomes (Visintin et al., 2020). Despite the positive effects of intergroup contact, there is also a chance of its negative backlash, such as the occurrence of other types of negative intergroup contact. In this case, other factors might be more salient, for instance, different interests, endangered group functioning (Killen & Rutland, 2011), or perceived threat from the out-group (Nesdale, 2004).

We also call for longitudinal studies to further explore the nature of relations between different norms and attitudes. This is particularly important as previous research has shown that the relationships between norms and intergroup outcomes differ when observed longitudinally (Tropp et al., 2016). Even though we were focused on the school context, aligning with the previous studies (Miklikowska et al., 2019; Pehar et al., 2020), we suggest incorporating parental norms, as their overarching influence could lead to a better understanding of the unique contributions of different normative influences that determine children's attitudes and behaviours towards refugee peers. In the meantime, the situation in Croatia regarding refugees has changed and besides people from the Middle East, there are also newly arriving refugees from the Ukraine. These new circumstances, though challenging, may be considered as an opportunity for schools to prepare classes for the arrival of refugee peers, by taking into account the importance of norms, as suggested by our study.

Finally, in the present study it was impossible to measure descriptive or prescriptive social norms in a classical manner since there is no opportunity to witness or observe intergroup contact. However, children are generally very positive towards refugees, and they expect that their social environment would also act positively by supporting and encouraging them to socialise with refugee peers.

## **Practical implications**

Our results indicate that positive social norms in the school context may be a very important factor in creating a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom. The focus of preparatory activities and school interventions should be on fostering positive teacher and peer norms because they are the best predictor of contact intention.



Since integration is a two-way process, to be successful, the role of domicile peers and their readiness to accept refugee children is crucial. Social integration is essential in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural settings, and the school is seen as a social leverage that has enormous potential for instigating and implementing change (Čorkalo Biruški & Ajduković, 2012).

However, when planning classroom interventions, depending on the outcome the intervention is aimed for, different norms should be considered as teachers' norms are more predictive of general attitudes and social acceptance, while peer norms are a stronger predictor of contact intentions.

## **CONCLUSION**

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In conclusion, the study shows how important social and personal norms are in predicting the three intergroup outcomes of domicile children towards refugee children, even if there had been no prior contact between them. The results indicate that social norms better predict these outcomes than personal norm. Furthermore, the relative importance of different norms for different outcomes is also highlighted, showing that the peer norms are more predictive for behavioural intentions, while teachers seem to play a more prominent role in the general evaluation and social acceptance. These findings should be considered when creating programmes aimed at helping integrate refugee children into schools. This study makes the first step in assessing children's attitudes towards refugee children in Croatia as the issue of migration and integration of refugee children becomes more and more relevant for Croatian schools and their classrooms become more and more diverse. There is a plethora of studies on refugee integration from more diverse countries; however, there are various contextual factors that can influence norms and attitudes, and hence it is of the utmost importance to explore these and other factors in newly receiving countries such as Croatia in order to better understand the process of integration itself, and to better respond to the needs of both refugee and domicile children.

## **Declaration of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Uloga socijalnih i osobnih normi domicilne djece u predviđanju stavova prema vršnjacima izbjeglicama

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Dokazano je da norme predviđaju razne međugrupne ishode među djecom. Provedeno je kvantitativno istraživanje s domicilnom djecom u Hrvatskoj ( $N = 184$ ) koja prethodno nisu imala kontakt s vršnjacima izbjeglicama, kako bi se ispitala uloga percipiranih socijalnih normi i osobne norme u predviđanju međugrupnih ishoda. Rezultati regresijske analize pokazuju kako percipirane nastavničke i vršnjačke norme te osobna norma o kontaktu s vršnjacima izbjeglicama značajno predviđaju opću evaluaciju, socijalno prihvaćanje i namjeru kontakta s djecom izbjeglicama. Rezultati također pokazuju da učiteljske norme bolje predviđaju stavove, dok vršnjaci imaju važniju ulogu u predviđanju namjere ponašanja. Ovi nalazi imaju važne implikacije za nastavnike i kreatore politika, posebno s obzirom na sve veće raznolikosti u hrvatskim školama.

Ključne riječi: stavovi prema izbjeglicama, socijalne norme, osobna norma, međugrupni odnosi, djeca izbjeglice



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