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## Interculturalism and the Acceptance of Minority Groups: The Role of Political Orientation

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# Interculturalism and the Acceptance of Minority Groups

## The Role of Political Orientation

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**Abstract:** Multiculturalism has been criticized and rejected by an increasing number of politicians, and social psychological research has shown that it can lead to outgroup stereotyping, essentialist thinking, and negative attitudes. Interculturalism has been proposed as an alternative diversity ideology, but there is almost no systematic empirical evidence about the impact of interculturalism on the acceptance of migrants and minority groups. Using data from a survey experiment conducted in the Netherlands, we examined the situational effect of promoting interculturalism on acceptance. The results show that for liberals, but not for conservatives, interculturalism leads to more positive attitudes toward immigrant-origin groups and increased willingness to engage in contact, relative to multiculturalism.

**Keywords:** interculturalism, multiculturalism, immigrants, attitudes

“Faced with growing public disenchantment, new strategies are required to revive the flagging political project of diversity in Europe and elsewhere. One such strategy is to build a new political narrative in which interculturalism emerges from the failed extremes of assimilation and multiculturalism” (Kymlicka, 2016, p. 174).

Leading European politicians and commentators across the left-right political spectrum have declared that multiculturalism has “utterly failed,” and this belief is widespread among the public (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2016; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). The Council of Europe surveyed 47 member states and concluded that “what had until recently been a preferred policy approach, conveyed in shorthand as ‘multiculturalism’, has been found inadequate” (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 9). European multiculturalism is argued to be asymmetrical and separatist because it neglects majorities and would encourage immigrants to remain segregated, resulting in societal resentment, fragmentation, and disunity (Goodhart, 2013; Joppke, 2006). The Council instead prefers the term “interculturalism” and the term has been employed in various European countries and has been adopted by the European commission (2008) and UNESCO (2009). It also features in education programs (Catarci & Fiorucci, 2015), and at the

local level in the Intercultural Cities Programme that has been adopted in various cities around the world (Wood, 2004).

Although some scholars argue that the difference between interculturalism and multiculturalism is exaggerated and that the former is a mere modification of the latter (Meer & Modood, 2012; Modood, 2017), advocates of interculturalism claim that it avoids many of the pitfalls associated with multiculturalism (Cantle, 2012, 2016; Zapata-Barrero, 2019). An important reason for this debate are the different understandings and conceptualizations of multiculturalism, such as symbolic, structural, dialogical, and lived multiculturalism (Barrett, 2013; Wise & Velayutham, 2009). However, in terms of diversity ideologies and how multiculturalism is typically examined in social psychology, the emphasis is on recognizing minority communities and allowing them to maintain and develop their cultural and religious beliefs and practices (Whitley & Webster, 2019). There are also different understandings of interculturalism (see Barrett, 2013), but its main purpose is to develop dialog, stimulate cultural change, and develop a sense of belonging together. “Multiculturalism tends to preserve a cultural heritage, while Interculturalism acknowledges and enables cultures to have currency, to be exchanged, to circulate, to be modified and evolve” (Sze & Powell, 2004, p. 8). The distinction

between the two diversity ideologies can also be described in terms of “fragmented pluralism” in which the focus is on distinctive and relatively self-contained communities, and “interactive pluralism” that posits the need for ongoing interactions, exchange, and cultural change (Hartmann & Gerteis, 2005).

Survey research among large national samples of majority members in the Netherlands and the USA has found that interculturalism and multiculturalism are empirically distinct constructs in lay people’s eyes, with interculturalism being more about intergroup equality, inclusion, and openness (Verkuyten, Yogeeswaran, Mepham, & Sprong, 2019). However, there is no experimental research on the situational influence of interculturalism on the acceptance of migrants and in relation to the political landscape which is strongly polarized around issues of immigration and cultural diversity (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). In the context of the Netherlands, we used a survey embedded experiment to test whether majority members on the political left (liberals) are more responsive to interculturalism compared to people on the right (conservatives) who overall tend to express stronger opposition to immigration and diversity.

## Interculturalism and Political Orientation

Of all European countries, the retreat of multiculturalism has been strongest in the Netherlands (Banting & Kymlicka, 2013; Koopmans, 2013). Not only people of the politically right, but also the left increasingly finds that multiculturalism has led to segregation and undermines the moral consensus and solidarity on which the Dutch welfare state rests (Scheffer, 2011). In line with this, whereas experimental research some 15 years ago found more positive attitudes toward immigrant-origin groups when Dutch majority members were encouraged to think in terms of multiculturalism (Verkuyten, 2005), more recent research does not find such an effect (Verkuyten, 2011). The changing social and political context makes it difficult to encourage people to seriously think in terms of multicultural benefits, and social psychological research has shown that multiculturalism can lead to more outgroup stereotyping (Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000), essentialist interpretations of group differences (Wilton, Apfelbaum & Good, 2019), and negative out-group attitudes (see Whitley & Webster, 2019, for a review).

The alternative notion of interculturalism has instead become more popular and features more commonly in accounts of immigration and diversity, especially among the political left. For them, interculturalism might offer a solution to the so-called “progressive dilemma” (Goodhart, 2013) or the “new liberal dilemma” (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2010) between diversity and solidarity. Progressives want diversity but this can undermine “part of the moral consensus on which a large welfare state rests” (Goodhart, 2013, p. xxi). There is empirical evidence for the existence of this dilemma among citizens across European countries (Kulin, Eger, & Hjerm, 2016). Interculturalism can present a “way out” of this dilemma because it emphasizes diversity in combination with cultural change and unity. This could mean that interculturalism provides a favorable ideological context for the acceptance of immigrants and cultural minorities among more liberal individuals. Thus our central prediction is that interculturalism (compared to multiculturalism) provides an ideological context in which liberals, but not conservatives, accept immigrant-origin groups more.

## Method

### Sample and Design

A probability sample of Dutch majority<sup>1</sup> members (18 years and older) was drawn by I&O Research, which is an independent research agency that specializes in conducting large-scale surveys. Participants received an online questionnaire about Dutch society (e.g., economic and political developments), history (e.g., nostalgia), nationhood (e.g. civic and ethnic understandings), and cultural diversity. The participants in this sample ( $N = 569$ ) came from all regions of the Netherlands, and of these participants, 136 were removed from analyses after failing a basic attention check (i.e., a multiple choice question asking participants about the name of the strategy they read about earlier with the options assimilation, multiculturalism or interculturalism to select from).<sup>2</sup> This left a sample of 433 participants (47.1% female, 52.9% males) who were between 16 and 87 years ( $M = 53.62$ ,  $SD = 15.17$ ).<sup>3</sup>

Participants were randomly assigned to the interculturalism ( $N = 126$ ), multiculturalism ( $N = 102$ ), or control

<sup>1</sup> Following the official definition of the Dutch Bureau of Statistics, this means people with both parents having been born in the Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> Because participants in online studies can easily skip the reading of introductions and manipulations, it is common practice to focus in the analysis on those participants who respond correctly to a simple attention check. The findings for the complete sample and for whether the performance on the attention check differs for those in the experimental conditions and for political orientation can be found in Electronic Supplementary Material (ESM 1).

<sup>3</sup> The data are available at <https://osf.io/hq973/>

( $N = 205$ ) conditions.<sup>4</sup> In the interculturalism and multiculturalism conditions, participants read a passage about interculturalism or multiculturalism as the strategy prescribed by social scientists as the mean to achieving harmonious interethnic relations in the Netherlands, similar to previous social psychological work in the field (e.g., Verkuyten, 2005; Wolsko et al., 2000; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014). The multiculturalism manipulation was taken directly from the existing experimental research literature (e.g., Vorauer, Gagnon, & Sasaki, 2009; Wolsko et al., 2000), and the interculturalism manipulation was based upon the writings of political philosophers and social scientists on the nature and meaning of interculturalism (e.g., Meer & Modood, 2012; Meer, Modood, & Zapata-Barrero, 2016).<sup>5</sup> In the control condition, participants were provided with no information and directly completed the dependent measures.

## Measures

### Outgroup Feelings

After the manipulation, participants completed a series of feeling thermometer measures assessing attitudes toward the four main immigrant-origin groups in the Netherlands: Turks, Moroccans, Surinamese, and Antilleans. Although these groups differ in various ways and have a different migration history, the four feeling measures were strongly correlated and formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

### Willingness to Have Contact

Participants completed a series of Likert-scale items (7-point scales) assessing their willingness to have contact with people of Turkish, Moroccan, and Antillean background. These items were recoded and collapsed into a single index of willingness to engage in intergroup contact (9 items;  $\alpha = .95$ ). Higher willingness to have contact was positively associated with more positive outgroup feelings ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ).

Finally, for assessing *political orientation*, the well-known and validated political self-placement scale (see Jost, 2006) was used, similar to previous studies in the Netherlands (e.g., Verkuyten, Martinovic, Smeekes, & Kros, 2016). The scale had 5 categories: (1) left (13.2% of the participants), (2) center left (18%), (3) center (38.8%), (4) center right (20.8%), and (5) right (9.2%).

## Results

### Outgroup Feelings

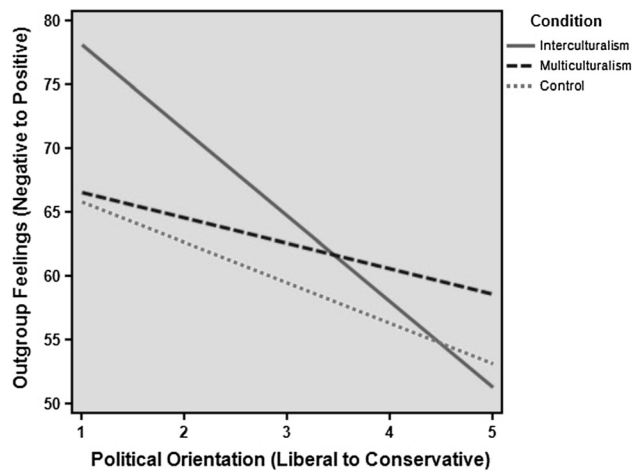
A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) first revealed a significant effect of experimental condition (i.e., diversity ideology) on outgroup feelings,  $F(2, 433) = 3.22, p = .04, \eta^2_p = .02$ . Planned contrasts showed that participants in the interculturalism condition ( $M = 64.64; SD = 17.58$ ) showed significantly more positive feelings toward the target groups than those in the control condition ( $M = 59.59; SD = 19.17$ ),  $t(430) = 2.45, p = .02$ . However, participants in the interculturalism condition ( $M = 64.64, SD = 17.58$ ) were not significantly different in their outgroup feelings from those in the multiculturalism condition ( $M = 62.91; SD = 16.97$ ),  $t < 1, p = .48$ . Similarly, participants primed with multiculturalism ( $M = 62.91; SD = 16.97$ ) were not significantly different in their outgroup feelings relative to those in the control condition ( $M = 59.59; SD = 19.17$ ),  $t(430) = -1.50, p = .13$ .

Multiple regression analyses using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro then examined the interactive effects of political orientation and diversity ideologies on outgroup attitudes. This analysis revealed a significant interaction between diversity ideology and political orientation,  $F(2, 427) = 2.98, p = .05, R^2 = .013$  (see Figure 1). We then decomposed this interaction by investigating the effects of diversity ideologies on outgroup feelings for those politically left (liberals; i.e., those indicating 2 on the 5-point political orientation measure) and those politically right (conservatives; i.e., those indicating 4 on the 5-point political orientation measure) separately. Data revealed that for people on the political left (liberal), interculturalism significantly increased positive outgroup feelings relative to multiculturalism,  $B = -6.88, SE = 3.03, p = .024, 95\% CI [-12.826, -0.931]$ , and the control condition,  $B = -8.82, SE = 2.70, p = .001, 95\% CI [-14.128, -3.511]$ . However, for participants on the political right (conservative), interculturalism had no impact on outgroup feelings relative to multiculturalism,  $B = 2.59, SE = 3.21, p = .42, 95\% CI [-3.722, 8.901]$ , or the control,  $B = -1.73, SE = 2.71, p = .52, 95\% CI [-7.062, 3.597]$ . For those in the political center (i.e., those indicating 3 on the 5-point political orientation measure), interculturalism had no effect on outgroup feelings relative to those in the multiculturalism condition,  $B = -2.14, SE = 2.36, p = .36, 95\% CI [-6.785, 2.496]$ , but significantly improved outgroup feelings relative to the control condition,  $B = -5.28, SE = 2.00, p = .009, 95\% CI [-9.203, -1.349]$ .<sup>6</sup>

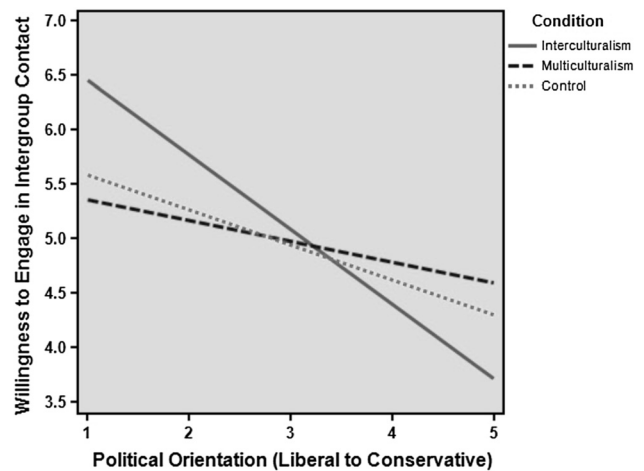
<sup>4</sup> Although the use of sensitivity power analysis has been criticized (e.g., Hoenig & Heisey, 2012; Levine & Ensom, 2001), we conducted such an analysis using G\*Power. This revealed that our effects are in line with what we observed in the paper. The findings can be found in ESM 1.

<sup>5</sup> See ESM 1 for the English translations of the manipulations used.

<sup>6</sup> In additional analyses we also controlled for age and gender and the pattern of findings for outgroup feelings and also for willingness to engage in contact, were similar to those reported.



**Figure 1.** Interaction of political orientation and diversity ideology on outgroup feelings.



**Figure 2.** Interaction of political orientation and diversity ideology on willingness to engage in intergroup contact.

## Willingness to Engage in Intergroup Contact

A similar one-way ANOVA first revealed a non-significant effect of diversity ideology on willingness to engage in intergroup contact,  $F < 1$ ,  $p = .79$ ,  $\eta^2_p < .01$ . However, multiple regression analyses using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro revealed a significant interaction effect between diversity ideology and political orientation,  $F(2, 427) = 4.80$ ,  $p = .008$ ,  $R^2 = .020$  (see Figure 2). Decomposing this interaction in a similar way as for outgroup feelings, revealed that participants on the political left showed greater willingness to engage in intergroup contact in the interculturalism condition compared to the multiculturalism,  $B = -0.61$ ,  $SE = 0.25$ ,  $p = .02$ , 95% CI  $[-1.092, -0.117]$ , and control condition,  $B = -0.51$ ,  $SE = 0.22$ ,  $p = .02$ , 95% CI  $[-0.940, -0.070]$ . However, for participants on the political right, interculturalism had no effect on willingness to engage in intergroup contact relative to both multiculturalism,  $B = 0.39$ ,  $SE = 0.26$ ,  $p = .14$ , 95% CI  $[-0.132, 0.901]$ , or the control,  $B = 0.22$ ,  $SE = 0.22$ ,  $p = .32$ , 95% CI  $[-0.215, 0.659]$ . For those in the political center (i.e., those indicating 3 on the 5-point political orientation measure), interculturalism had no effect on willingness to engage in intergroup contact relative to those in the multiculturalism,  $B = -0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ,  $p = .57$ , 95% CI  $[-0.490, 0.271]$ , and control conditions,  $B = -0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p = .39$ , 95% CI  $[-0.464, 0.181]$ .

## Discussion

The notion that multiculturalism with its emphasis on separate cultural groups tends to undermine societal solidarity

has become a commonly expressed fear, also among liberals who see both cultural diversity and a sharing welfare state as essentially good. With its emphasis on dialog, cultural change, and unity, interculturalism might provide a solution to this “progressive” or “new liberal dilemma” (Goodhart, 2013; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2010). The current findings demonstrate for the first time that interculturalism indeed can provide an ideological context in which left-wing oriented majority members express more positive attitudes toward immigrant-origin groups, whereas multiculturalism does not provide such a context. However, it does not seem to convince more conservative people who might consider interculturalism and multiculturalism as not being really distinct perspectives, or perceive interculturalism more as a modification rather than an alternative to multiculturalism (see Meer & Modood, 2012; Modood, 2017).

It should be recognized that the effects that we found were not very strong, but this has to be evaluated in light of using an on-line text-based manipulation. It is likely that, for example, vivid visual experimental material is more convincing and engaging and therefore has stronger effects. Furthermore, it is to be expected that the outcomes we observed are magnified outside the experimental setting when interculturalism is a persistent feature of the ideological context.

It remains to be seen whether interculturalism is also a promising approach in other countries because there are important country differences in the history and accommodation of migrants and the understanding of cultural diversity ideologies (Guimond, de la Sablonnière, & Nugier, 2014). However, survey findings show that interculturalism is a similarly distinct empirical construct in the USA (Verkuyten et al., 2019), and experimental research has demonstrated that political orientation is important for

understanding White American's reactions toward various construals of multiculturalism (Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014).

Future research should also examine the minority's perspective. While multiculturalism is strongly endorsed by minority members and has more consistent beneficial effects for ethnic minorities than for majorities (Verkuyten, 2006), this does not have to be the case for interculturalism. Interculturalism has been criticized for ignoring the fact that any dialog and change is affected by power relations and group status differences (Barrett, 2013). The cultural change implicated in interculturalism might make it less responsive to the fact that ethnic and faith identities continue to be a very important for many minority members who can face unfair disadvantages and social exclusion in various domains of life.

We hope that our work will stimulate social psychologists to further examine the causes and consequences of interculturalism, and when, why, and for whom interculturalism has beneficial implications for the acceptance of immigrants in our increasingly diverse and complex societies. Much is at stake as social psychologists and policy makers try to find ways to accommodate newcomers and recognize cultural diversity without leading to a backlash from the majority group (Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014). Interculturalism has been championed by various governments and international organizations, but little systematic empirical work has been done to explore its consequences. Our findings demonstrate that interculturalism is a promising approach for stimulating positive intergroup relations, at least among left-wing people in Western Europe. However, interculturalism does not seem equally effective for conservatives which means that the scholarly and political debate about how to manage cultural diversity may not be resolved by adopting an interculturalism approach.

## Electronic Supplementary Material

The electronic supplementary material is available with the online version of the article at <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000404>

**ESM 1.** The ESM contains information on (A) the experimental manipulation used, (B) power analysis, (C) full sample analyses.

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### Authorship

Both authors were involved in the design of the study and the collection of the data. Verkuyten wrote the Introduction and Discussion, and Yogeeswaran analyzed the data and wrote the Method and Results section.

### Open Data

The data contain all the original information collected and analyzed for the current analysis. The data are available at <https://osf.io/hq973/>.

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