

## Similarity, Contact, and Positive Attitudes toward Peruvians: Mediation of Symbolic and Realistic Threats



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In intergroup relationships, there are different explanations for positive attitudes toward outgroups. The present study examined a model that included some of these explanations that were not considered together previously. Based on the similarity-attraction hypothesis, contact hypothesis, common ingroup identity model, and intergroup threat theories, we expected a positive association of perceived similarity and contact quality and quantity with positive attitudes toward Peruvians, with the mediation of perceived symbolic (identity) and realistic (employment) threats. We hypothesized that contact quality would have a stronger link than quantity with positive attitudes and perceived threats. Using data from an open Chilean survey ( $N = 944$ ), the results supported the relationship of perceived similarity and contact quality and quantity with positive attitudes toward Peruvians, with the mediation of perceived symbolic and realistic threats, except for the association of contact quantity with positive attitudes. As expected, contact quality was linked to more symbolic and realistic threats than contact quantity, but was not related to more positive attitudes. The relative relevance of the predictors and mediator variables for future interventions oriented to improve intergroup attitudes and the limitations associated with the sample and data analysis are discussed.

*Key words:* migration, similarity, contact, threat, attitudes

International migration, understood as a change of residence involving the crossing of a defined national geographic or administrative boundary (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021), necessarily involves interactions between migrants

and the host community. This interaction can have positive consequences for both actors in terms of economic, social, and cultural exchanges; however, it is also possible that potential conflicts are associated with the co-existence of different people (e.g., Brown &

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Zagefka, 2011; Urzúa, Leiva, & Caqueo-Urizar, 2020).

Research on the factors that can contribute to a more effective and positive interaction of the migrant/community dyad can be approached from various perspectives, one of which is related to how the community perceives the migrant population, considering that this perception will affect their way of relating both positively (greater integration) and negatively (e.g., prejudice and discrimination).

The present study focuses on South-South migration, that is, South American migrants in a South American country. Specifically, we analyzed whether the association of similarity and contact with positive attitudes of Chileans toward Peruvians is mediated by the perception of symbolic and realistic threats perceived by Chileans. Although previous studies have examined similarity and contact as predictors of intergroup attitudes (e.g., Bressan et al., 2009) they have not tested both symbolic and realistic threats as mediators. We focused on similarity and contact because they are two of the most studied predictors of intergroup attitudes. Therefore, it is necessary to examine if their prediction can be explained for both realistic and symbolic threats.

### Similarity

Similarity is crucial in intergroup processes. The similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne, 1971) proposes that individuals like and are attracted to similar people. Based on this hypothesis, several studies have reported the effect of similarity on positive attitudes toward other individuals or groups (e.g., Bressan et al., 2009; Grigoryan, 2020; for a review see Montoya et al., 2008; Myers et al., 2014; Singh & Ho, 2000). Individuals tend to perceive themselves as being more similar to other ingroup members than to outgroup members (Brewer, 1979; Simon, 1992).

According to the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM), when individuals perceive themselves as similar to other ingroup members as compared to outgroup members, they reduce their intergroup bias; thus, their positive attitudes toward ingroup members can be extended to outgroups (Dovidio et al., 2007; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Gaertner et al., 1993; Gaertner et al., 1996). According to this theory, intergroup bias diminution is explained by the creation of a common identity, in which individuals perceive themselves and outgroup members as part of a greater, superordinate group (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2012; Dovidio et al., 2007). This theory has been supported empirically by considering different types of outgroups, including immigrants (e.g., Andrighetto et al., 2012; Banfield & Dovidio, 2013; Glasford & Dovidio 2011; González & Brown, 2006; McFarland et al., 2019; Noor et al., 2008; Riek et al., 2006; Röpke et al., 2018; Stone & Crisp, 2007). In the case of immigrants, there is no consensus that similarity always has a positive effect on attitudes toward immigrants. It has been argued that while ethnic similarity with natives may offer an advantage to immigrants in the search for housing or educational opportunities, it may hinder entry into the labor market, given that immigrants are perceived as a greater threat because they are perceived to have the same rights as natives (Cook-Martín & Viladrich, 2009).

### Contact

Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis proposes that intergroup contact leads to better intergroup relationships. Following the CIIM, this contact would contribute to creating a common identity and thus reducing the intergroup bias, extending the positive view of ingroup members to outgroup members (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 2012; Gaertner et

al., 1993). In addition to the CIIM, the contact hypothesis has been extensively supported by different studies. Specifically, the quantity and/or quality (more positive) of contact with outgroups promotes more trust (González et al., 2017; Vezzali et al., 2012) and less threat (Bagci et al., 2018; González et al., 2010), prejudice (Carmona-Halty et al., 2018; Turner & Crisp, 2010), and intergroup anxiety toward them (González et al., 2010; Turner et al., 2013), among others. These positive effects have been observed toward different types of outgroups based on nationality, ethnic origin, and religion, among others (for a review see Dovidio et al., 2017; Hodson & Hewstone, 2013; Landabur & Henríquez, 2023; Miles & Crisp, 2014; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Contact quality has shown more association than contact quantity with explicit measures of intergroup attitudes (e.g., Prestwich et al., 2008; Turner et al., 2007; van Ryn et al., 2015). Explicit attitudes refer to attitudes in which a person is consciously aware, whereas for implicit attitudes, individuals are not. Explicit attitudes tend to be evaluated through self-report scales and implicit attitudes through performance on cognitive tests (McCartan et al., 2018).

### Threat Perception

Threat perception has been conceptualized according to intergroup threat theory. This theory proposes that conflict between groups may be due to the perception of the outgroup as a realistic or symbolic threat to the ingroup. Both types of threats were considered because they point to different aspects of the threat. Realistic threats refer to threats to a group's welfare, resources, status, and power, while symbolic threats refer to threats to beliefs, values, morality, ideas, religion, and worldviews (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Stephan et al., 2009). Research conducted in

different places, including Chile, has reported that threat perception leads to more prejudice and discrimination (e.g., González et al., 2010; Licata et al., 2011; Navas et al., 2012; Pereira et al., 2010; Riek et al., 2006; Zárate et al., 2004); less threat perception can promote more positive attitudes toward outgroups (e.g., Florack et al., 2003; Vink et al., 2019).

### The Present Study

The present study is interested in the similarity perception of the Chilean to Peruvian population because the latter constitutes one of the largest immigrant communities in Chile in recent decades (e.g., Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia, 2011; Departamento de Extranjería y Migración, 2020) and they have been victims of prejudice and discrimination by the local population (for a review see González et al., 2016). According to the similarity-attraction hypothesis and CIIM, a positive relationship between similarity and positive attitudes toward Peruvians is expected (Hypothesis 1).

Based on the contact hypothesis and CIIM we hypothesized that contact quality (Hypothesis 2) and quantity (Hypothesis 3) would be associated with more positive attitudes. Likewise, we would expect a stronger link of contact quality than contact quantity with positive attitudes (Hypothesis 4) and the mediators (Hypothesis 5). A positive relationship was expected between the two types of threats. Positive correlations have been reported in different countries, including Chile (e.g., Carmona-Halty et al., 2018; Stephan et al., 1998).

Further, symbolic and realistic threats would mediate the association of similarity and contact with positive attitudes toward Peruvians. Specifically, similarity, contact quantity, and contact quality would be related to less threat perception, which, in turn, would be associat-

ed with more positive attitudes toward Peruvians (Hypothesis 6). The expected mediation is shown in Figure 1. Those mediations are expected because, according to the CIIM, when people see immigrants as more similar and have more contact quality and quantity with them, they perceive them as part of the same superordinate group. Consequently, the intergroup conflicts should be reduced, and thus, following the intergroup threat theory, hosts would perceive immigrants as less threatening. The present study did not directly test the aforementioned theories but used them as a basis to interpret the results.

The objective was to analyze whether perceived symbolic and realistic threats mediate the relationship of similarity and contact (quantity and quality) with positive attitudes toward Peruvians. This study would enrich the literature by relating these variables in the same model, which has not been explored previously to our knowledge. This would show two aspects. First, the relevance of the three predictors to understanding the attitudes toward a particular group, Peruvians, a community characterized by gradual and

steady immigration over the recent decades (Servicio Nacional de Migraciones, 2022). Second, how much of those predictors' link with the dependent variable is explained by the mediators, symbolic and realistic threats, which tend to be included in the same measurement (Carmona-Halty et al., 2018; Sirlopú et al., 2013) or sometimes studied separately (González et al., 2017; González et al., 2010) in South American countries. The two types of threat have not been included as mediators in the same model. This differentiation is important because it represents distinct threat perceptions of immigrants and implies different interventions to improve the attitudes toward the immigrant community.

## Method

Open data from the Chile Longitudinal Social Survey 2017 were used in this study (ELSOC, from Spanish Estudio Longitudinal Social de Chile) conducted by the Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES in Spanish, 2018a). ELSOC analyzed how a representative sample of the Chilean population feels, thinks,

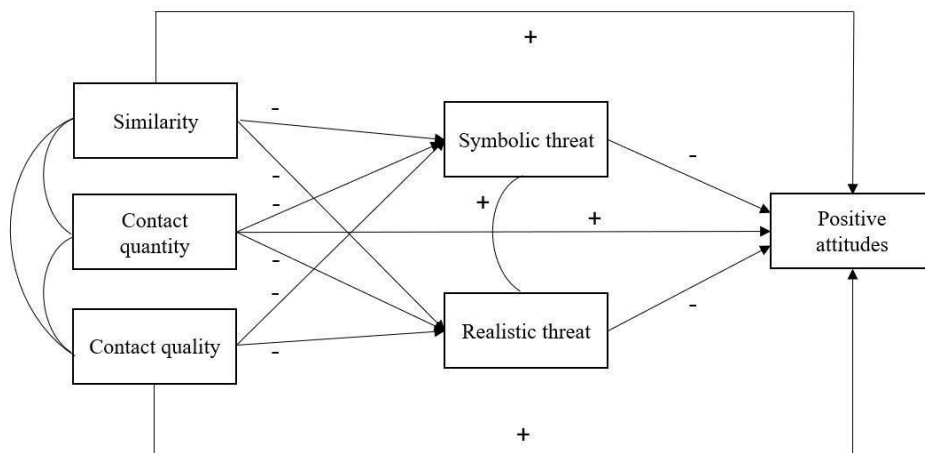


Figure 1 Expected associations with positive attitudes toward Peruvians.

and behaves on issues about social cohesion and conflict in Chile, according to the COES manual (COES, 2018b). The Micro Data Center of the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Chile developed the survey, which included fieldwork. The data were collected between July and October 2017 (data is available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/JDJLPQ>). The sample design was probabilistic and stratified by conglomerates and multi-stage processes. The survey was conducted through personal interviews conducted in respondents' houses. The interviewer used a tablet with a computer-assisted personal interview system.

### Participants

The survey included 2473 participants. In this study, respondents who answered all the scales detailed below were included. The final sample was composed of 945 Chilean individuals between the ages of 18 and 75 years. A total of 55.77% of the participants were women (see supplementary material for more participants' details).

### Measurements and Procedure

ELSOC study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (ID Protocol 160129004). Participants gave their informed consent in writing and then they answered the questions in the following order: contact quantity and quality (positive and negative) with Peruvians, liking, similarity, trust, symbolic and realistic threats, identification with Chile, and demographic characteristics.

The independent variables were similarity and contact quality, and quantity. Participants answered how similar they were to Peruvians living in Chile from 1 (not at all similar) to 5

(very similar). The contact quality and quantity over the last year with Peruvians living in Chile were evaluated. For contact quality, participants answered how friendly have been their interactions with Peruvians from 1 (very unfriendly) to 5 (very friendly). For contact quantity, the respondents indicated how much they talked or interacted with Peruvians over the last year from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

Mediator variables were symbolic and realistic threats, which were evaluated using a scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree) for the following statements "With the arrival of so many Peruvians, Chile is losing its identity" and "With the arrival of so many Peruvians to Chile, unemployment is rising" respectively.

For the dependent variable, participants indicated in general terms how much they like (ranging from 1 – not much or nothing to 5 – very much) Peruvians living in Chile.

Identification with Chile, education level, sex, and age were controlled for all analyses because they can affect the mediators and/or dependent variable (e.g., Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Florack et al., 2003; González et al., 2010; Kende et al., 2019). For identification with Chile, respondents indicated how much they identified with Chile on a scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). All analyses were conducted using the R program version 3.5.1 (Lavaan package; R Core Team, 2020).

### Results

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations.

The correlations were consistent with our model: the independent variables – contact quality and quantity and similarity – correlated positively with positive attitudes and negatively with both types of threat. Likewise, symbolic and realistic threats were associated

Table 1 *Descriptive statistics and correlations*

	Positive Attitudes	Simil.	Simb. Threat	Real. Threat	Cont. quantity	Cont. Quality	Identif. Chile	Age
Similarity	.40***							
Simb. Threat	-.34***	-.22***						
Real. Threat	-.37***	-.17***	.63***					
Cont. Quantity	.26***	.08**	-.10**	-.10**				
Cont. Quality	.41***	.18***	-.22***	-.17***	.25***			
Identif. Chile	-.05	-.03	.13***	.14***	-.02	-.01		
Age	-.03	-.09**	.10**	.07*	.07*	.00	.12***	
<i>M</i>	3.12	2.58	2.81	3.03	3.00	3.52	4.29	43.97
<i>SD</i>	.90	1.16	1.21	1.24	.98	1.05	.82	14.35

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

positively with each other and the dependent variable. Moreover, the independent variables correlated positively among them.

We conducted a regression analysis including the independent, dependent, and control variables. Independent variables were normalized. As expected, similarity (standardized regression coefficient  $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and contact quality ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and quantity ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ) had a positive association with positive attitudes toward Peruvians, according to Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, respectively. To evaluate whether contact quality had a greater relationship than contact quantity, a Wald test was performed<sup>1</sup> = 2.74,  $p = .003$  (one-tailed). Contact quality was associated with more positive attitudes than contact quantity; thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

To evaluate whether symbolic and realistic threats mediated the association of similarity and contact with positive attitudes, a multiple regression analysis was performed. Similarity and contact quality and quantity were included as independent variables; symbolic and realistic threats as mediators; positive attitudes as the dependent variable; and the control

variables (see supplementary material for more details about regression analysis). Independent and mediator variables were centered. Hypothesis 5 was supported partially, contact quality had a stronger association than contact quantity with symbolic threats: Wald test = -2.22,  $p = .013$  (one-tailed) but not with realistic threats: Wald test = -.98,  $p = .163$  (one-tailed).

The standardized regression coefficients are shown in Figure 2. In Figure S1 (online supplement) are detailed the same model without control variables (see the supplementary material) \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p < .05$ . Numbers in parentheses refer to the standardized coefficient after the mediators were added to the regression equation.

Except for contact quantity, the results supported the proposed mediation model in Hypothesis 6. Similarity and contact quality, but not contact quantity, had negative relationships with symbolic threats. Similarly, similarity and contact quality, but not contact quantity, predicted a less realistic threat. Symbolic and realistic threats were associated with fewer positive attitudes toward Peruvians. Similarity and contact quality and quantity had direct positive relationships

<sup>1</sup>  $(b_{\text{quality}} - b_{\text{quantity}}) / [(s^2_{\text{quality}} + s^2_{\text{quantity}} - 2 \cdot \text{Cov}(\text{quality}, \text{quantity}))^{1/2}]$

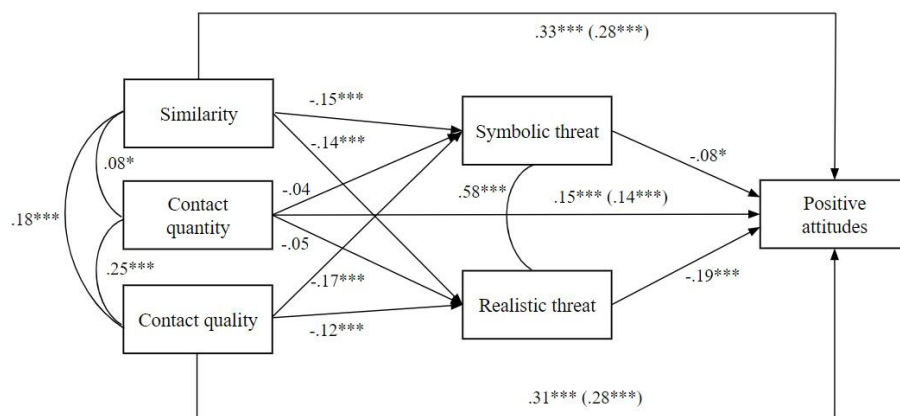


Figure 2 Standardized coefficients of the proposed mediation model.

Table 2 Standardized direct, indirect and total associations with positive attitudes

	Direct	Indirect	Total
Similarity → Positive attitudes	0.28***	0.04***	0.32***
Similarity → Symbolic threats → Positive attitudes		0.012*	
Similarity → Realistic threats → Positive attitudes		0.026***	
Cont. quality → Positive attitudes	0.28***	0.04**	0.32***
Cont. quality → Symbolic threats → Positive attitudes		0.013*	
Cont. quality → Realistic threats → Positive attitudes		0.022**	
Cont. quantity → Positive attitudes	0.14***	0.013	0.15***
Cont. quantity → Symbolic threats → Positive attitudes		0.00	
Cont. quantity → Realistic threats → Positive attitudes		0.01	

Note. <sup>a</sup>Total indirect relationship.

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

with positive attitudes. This partial mediation model explains 36% of the variance in the dependent variable. The direct and indirect links with positive attitudes are detailed in Table 2.

Sobel tests showed that the mediation was significant for the association of similarity (Sobel test = 2.02,  $p = .022$ , one-tail through symbolic threats, and Sobel test = 3.41,  $p < .001$  through realistic threats) and contact quality

(Sobel test = 2.06,  $p = .020$ , one-tail through symbolic threats, and Sobel test = 3.03,  $p = .001$  through realistic threats) with positive attitudes.

The Wald test revealed that the association between realistic threats and positive attitudes was stronger than between symbolic threats and the dependent variable: Wald test = -1.423,  $p = .08$  (one-tailed).

### Discussion

The objective was to analyze whether perceived symbolic and realistic threats mediate the association of similarity and contact (quantity and quality) with positive attitudes toward Peruvians. As expected, similarity (Hypothesis 1), contact quality (Hypothesis 2), and contact quantity (Hypothesis 3) were related to more positive attitudes. Likewise, according to Hypothesis 4, this relationship was stronger for contact quality than for contact quantity. Hypothesis 5 was partially supported because contact quality had a stronger link with symbolic (but not realistic threats) than contact quantity. Hypothesis 6 was also partially supported as symbolic and realistic threats mediated the relationship of similarity and contact quality, but not the link of contact quantity, with positive attitudes.

This study included more variables than previous research, which gives a more integrative understanding of positive attitudes toward Peruvians for two reasons. First, it tested if the extensively examined relationship of similarity and contact quality and quantity with positive intergroup attitudes can be mediated by both types of threats in concrete dimensions (identity and employment for symbolic and realistic threats, respectively). The inclusion of both threats is important because each threat dimension – which has not been included together in the same model in South American studies – would require a specific intervention. Second, it allows for a comparison between the direct and indirect associations between the independent and dependent variables. In our model the found direct associations were much higher than the indirect ones. From these results, it is possible to hypothesize that intervention programs should be focused mainly on promoting contact and emphasizing similarities between locals and

immigrants. While reducing realistic and symbolic threats toward the immigrant population should be treated secondarily. Future research is necessary to evaluate this tentative explanation considering different local and immigrant communities from South America.

Although there are no previous studies including the same variables as our model, some comparisons can be made. For example, González et al. (2010) also found a relationship of similarity and contact (a combination of quantity and quality) with prejudice toward Peruvians, mediated by realistic threats. That study also reported higher direct than indirect associations but showed higher values for the indirect relationship than the present study. This comparison must be taken cautiously because González et al. (2010) did not include symbolic threat as a mediator, which would change the other relationship values, and measured realistic threat, contact, and similarity with more items than the present study, which only used single items. Beyond a specific comparison with previous research, both studies show the need to include new mediators in the present model.

This study included relevant variables derived from traditional explanations of intergroup attitudes in the same model. The observed relationships in the mediation model were consistent with the similarity-attraction hypothesis, CIIM, contact hypothesis, and intergroup threat theories (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2017; Montoya et al., 2008; Riek et al., 2006). The relationships found in the present sample should be interpreted according to specific designs and measurements. For example, a realistic threat was evaluated using a specific single item referring to the unemployment rate. Therefore, the effect size of realistic threats on positive attitudes cannot be directly compared with other types of realistic threats, such as personal security, access to health, or education systems. Likewise,



the present links of similarity with positive attitudes and threat perceptions differ from those of other studies in which similarity can be associated with the idea that hosts and immigrants have the same rights, and therefore, immigrants are perceived by hosts as a threat (e.g., Cook-Martín & Viladrich, 2009). The relationship among these variables is complex and may depend on other variables from the social context (e.g., how similarity is interpreted in different cultures), which should be addressed in future research. Although the present study cannot provide a conclusive direction for these associations, it does present a contribution. This study supports the notion that for gradual and steady immigration, such as Peruvians in Chile, the positive attitudes of the hosts through less perceived threat would be better explained by the contact quality and similarity. In contrast, the relationship between contact quantity and positive attitudes would not be due to the perceived threats.

The stronger link between symbolic threat and contact quality rather than contact quantity, which does not have a significant relationship, is in line with the literature (e.g., Prestwich et al., 2008; van Ryn et al., 2015). At the same time, contact quality did not have a stronger association with realistic threats than contact quantity. A tentative explanation for the first result is that the Chilean sample could be the greater extent of Peruvian immigration in Chile, which has been one of the largest foreign communities in recent decades (e.g., Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia, 2011; Departamento de Extranjería y Migración, 2020). It is relatively common for Chileans to interact with Peruvians. In the present study, the average score of contact quantity was in the middle of the scale (3.0), and previous studies indicated that approximately 36% of Chileans interact frequently with Peruvians (González et al., 2017). Thus, symbolic threat perception toward Peruvians

would be guided more by contact quality than quantity. Previous research on Chilean samples revealed a negative association of contact quality (e.g., González et al., 2017) and quantity (e.g., González et al., 2010) with perceived symbolic threats. Nevertheless, they did not simultaneously consider contact quality and quantity in their models. Therefore, it was not possible to compare these results with the present result. The lack of a difference in the second finding (contact quality did not have a stronger association with realistic threats than contact quantity), could be explained by the specific type of realistic threat examined (unemployment), considering that previous studies have used a broader measure of intergroup attitudes (Prestwich et al., 2008; Prestwich et al., 2008; Turner et al., 2007; van Ryn et al., 2015). Future studies could compare the relationships of contact quality and quantity with intergroup attitudes, considering outgroups with different levels and types of interaction, for example, a less gradual and steady immigration process, and a more complete measurement of realistic threat.

Another possible consequence of the extended interaction time between Chileans and Peruvians could be the stability of the perceived threat measures. In the present study, the average was around the midpoint for both types of threat (2.81 and 3.02 for symbolic and realistic, respectively). Previous Chilean studies have reported similar values (e.g., Carmona-Halty et al., 2018; González et al., 2010; Sirlopú & Van Oudenhoven, 2013). A longitudinal study could examine the impact of contact quantity on the perceived threat toward Peruvians and the degree to which this impact depends on contact quality.

The limitations of the present study are associated with the sample and data collection. ELSOC data are representative of the Chilean population, while the sample of the present study was younger and had more men and

fewer women proportionally than the total survey (2473 participants); therefore, the present results should be taken cautiously. Moreover, the variables were collected simultaneously and measured but not manipulated; therefore, the analysis performed in the present study does not allow us to support causal associations. However, the results were consistent with previous studies that manipulated similarity (e.g., Zárate et al., 2004), contact (Bagci et al., 2019; Gómez & Huici, 2008), and perceived threat (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Stephan et al., 2005). An alternative model was tested including positive attitudes as the independent variable, contact quality and quantity and similarity as the dependent variables, and both types of threats as mediators. This model showed the expected significant relationships of the independent variable with the rest of the variables, but only one mediation was significant (see Figure S2 in the online supplementary material). Thus, future studies should examine alternative models that manipulate positive attitudes toward immigrant communities. Another limitation is that there is no other target group to test our model's stability. However, the links of our independent and mediator variables are in line with previous research that used these variables but not in the same model as we mentioned earlier. Another limitation was associated with the measurements. Contact quantity and quality, perceived threats and attitudes were evaluated with a single item, which could be problematic because it was not possible to calculate a reliability index. However, single item measurements of contact and attitudes have shown similar results to multi-item evaluations (e.g., Ang & Eisend, 2018; González et al., 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). These limitations do not necessarily invalidate our results, but rather point out that they should be interpreted cautiously.

Despite these limitations, the present study tested a model that included variables not considered together previously, and that contributes toward understanding ways to improve intergroup relationships.

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