

**The mediating role of cognitive empathy in the relationship between multilingualism and refugee acceptance**

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*Abstract*

Research argues that speaking multiple languages affects a person’s levels of empathy and the way that a person responds to outgroups. Past findings have also suggested that having higher levels of cognitive empathy, also known as perspective-taking, can make a person more accepting of outgroups. Using a compound score of multilingualism, the Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (QCAE), and the Refugee Perception questionnaire, I investigated the impact of speaking multiple languages on acceptance of refugees, and whether having high cognitive empathy mediated that relationship. The results suggested no significant direct or mediated relationship between multilingualism and refugee acceptance but did show evidence of a link between cognitive empathy and refugee acceptance. The results also showed a direct relationship between the linguistic distance of a language from English and refugee acceptance, although this was not mediated by cognitive empathy. Theoretical and applied implications are discussed.

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*Non-Academic Summary*

1 in 97 people in the world have fled their homes as a result of conflict or persecution. The refugee crisis in the EU has been widely spoken about in the press, encouraging hostile views towards refugees. However, if refugees are not accepted in their new country, it can inhibit their feeling of belonging and even lead to serious mental health issues.

There is evidence that speaking multiple languages can make you a more empathetic person (meaning you are able to put yourself in someone else’s shoes), and that being more empathetic means you are more accepting of others. In this study, ways of increasing acceptance of refugees in the UK were investigated through an online survey which measured people’s levels of language-speaking, empathy, and acceptance of refugees, and attempted to draw links between them.

No link was found between speaking multiple languages and being accepting of refugees, but evidence that being more empathetic leads to more positive perceptions of refugees was found. Therefore, ways of encouraging people to be more empathetic towards others could help to create a more welcoming environment for refugees in the UK.

**Word count: 187**

*Contents*

1. ***Introduction……………………………………………………………………………….5***
   1. Multilingualism and attitudes towards outgroups…………………………………….5
   2. Empathy and attitudes towards outgroups……………………………………………7
   3. Multilingualism and cognition……….……………………………………………….9
   4. The current study…………………………………………………………………….11
2. ***Method…………………………………………………………………………………...12***
   1. Study design, participants, and recruitment..………………………………………..12
   2. Measures…………………………………………………………………………….13
3. ***Results……………………………………………………………………………………16***
4. ***Discussion………………………………………………………………………………..25***
   1. Limitations and directions for future research………………………………………28
   2. Conclusion…………………………………………………………………………..30
5. ***References……………………………………………………………………………….31***
6. ***Appendices………………………………………………………………………………40***

**Introduction**

1 in 97 people in the world have fled their homes as a result of conflict or persecution (Red Cross, 2022). Of those, 37,500 landed on British shores in 2020 – around a third of the number that applied for asylum in each of Germany, France, and Spain (Red Cross, 2022). This number is only set to increase with the war in Ukraine, ongoing at the time of writing, and further crises that could be elicited by the threat of global warming, shortages of raw materials, and the rise of far-right governments across the world (Worth, 2019; Caiani, 2019).

However, sentiment towards refugees, defined as those fleeing conflict or persecution (UNHCR, 2019), remains neutral and in many cases hostile, especially in the UK (Öztürk & Ayvaz, 2018). This is a problem because acceptance by the host country’s people is instrumental at every stage of the refugee journey, vital in helping them adjust to life and reducing the risk of serious mental health issues (Gonsalves, 1992). Studies have shown that the attitudes of members of the receiving country’s people are crucial to creating a welcoming environment (Okamoto & Ebert, 2016) because they define the relationship between the immigrant, the receiving society, and its members (Kotzur et al., 2018). Prejudice stems from the nature of relationships between groups in society (Tajfel et al., 1979), perpetuating hierarchies and lack of social mobility for lower status groups (Abrams & Hogg, 2010), meaning that a lack of social cohesion between immigrants and a recipient society will hinder progress in a globalised world.

**Multilingualism and attitudes towards outgroups**

Increasing international migration, the growth of technology, and advances in transport has led to increased exposure to different languages. Duolingo, a free language-learning app, has over 500 million users worldwide (Blanco, 2021), and it is estimated that over 60% of EU citizens speak more than one language (Cedefop, 2010). Although it can facilitate relationships, language can also be used to communicate prejudice (Collins & Clement, 2012). Social identity theory posits that people categorise themselves into ingroups (us) and outgroups (them), and that members of an ingroup will seek to negatively perceive members of an outgroup in order to enhance their self-image (Tajfel et al., 1979). Language is a primary means through which group membership is made salient and therefore can be a primary means of communicating these negative perceptions. Indeed, Pehrson et al. (2009) found that national identification predicts prejudice against immigrants most clearly in countries where the foundations of national identity are based on language.

Increased exposure to and learning of languages has led to language-based ingroups and outgroups simultaneously becoming more salient and more blurred, as people identify both with their own language group and with that of the language which they are learning. Guiora et al. (1975) state that language can affect the permeability of barriers between groups because learning the language of an outgroup facilitates a relationship between the speaker and the outgroup member. Studies have demonstrated that learning the language of an outgroup reduces prejudice towards and induces more positive representations of them amongst a dominant ingroup (Wright & Bougie, 2007; Rubenfeld et al., 2007). Servidio et al. (2021) found that multilingual Italians showed increased acceptance of Moroccan immigrants, mediated by the quality of contact between the groups. Furthermore, there are demonstrative advantages of immigrants being multilingual in their host country. Speaking both English and their mother tongue has been shown to have cognitive and emotional benefits for immigrants in the US (Seals & Peyton, 2017) and encourage sociocultural adaptation in Australia (Buchanan et al., 2018).

It has also been shown that there is a positive relationship between multilingualism and openness towards *general* outgroups, mediated by the ability to flexibly understand and represent information and to re-evaluate one’s ethnocentric worldview (Mepham and Martinovic, 2017). However, this finding is a rarity amongst empirical research to date, most of which has focussed on the effect of speaking another language and the resulting relationship with the group with which that language is associated, rather than general outgroups. Even fewer studies consider the effect of multilingualism on perception of refugees; Garcia-Vazquez et al. (2022) found that bi/multilingual respondents in Spain and the US were more accepting of immigrants than monolinguals, especially those from poorer countries, but this area remains little researched. This study found that results were consistent regardless of the ethnicity of immigrants considered, which is interesting in light of the war in Ukraine and the influx to Europe of Ukrainian immigrants compared to those from the Middle East or Africa. The current study will add to this research by investigating the potential differences between perceptions of Ukranian refugees and Middle Eastern or African refugees amongst UK citizens, and whether speaking another language affects perception of the overall group of refugees.

**Empathy and attitudes towards outgroups**

Previous research has argued that empathy plays a key role in reducing prejudice towards outgroups (e.g. Shih et al., 2009; Shih et al., 2013; Vanman, 2016). Reniers et al. (2011) define two types of empathy: cognitive empathy (also called perspective-taking), where the person focuses on putting themselves in another person's shoes; and affective empathy, which engenders emotional reactions to others. Studies have found that cognitive empathy in isolation affects attitudes towards outgroups. Batson et al. (1997) found that when asking people to listen to an interviewee describing their experience with AIDs or homelessness, those who were asked to imagine how the interviewee feels were more likely to have more positive attitudes towards the respective outgroups than participants who were asked to remain objective. Vescio et al. (2003) found similar results when asking students to imagine themselves in the shoes of an African American male describing difficulties he had faced as a result of his group membership. In a review of empirical research, Todd and Galinsky (2014) found that perspective-taking resulted in more favourable implicit and explicit evaluations of outgroups, although this did depend on qualifiers such as characteristics of group members and contextual factors. Altogether, these results suggest that not only sympathising but truly imagining oneself in the other person’s place is needed to encourage positive attitudes towards outgroups.

Unfortunately, the act of putting oneself into a refugee’s shoes is little encouraged in the UK, since the media play a major role in dehumanising refugees (Louis et al., 2013; Parker, 2015). This enables the general public to detach themselves from refugees as people and instead think of them as a mass “other”, inhibiting cognitive empathy and consequently fostering prejudice (Louis et al., 2013). Therefore, if research can find a link between the trait of perspective-taking and positive attitudes towards refugees, we could encourage the development of this trait amongst citizens in order to foster more human perceptions of fled people, and therefore higher acceptance. The current study will aim to find this link.

There is a relatively small body of research investigating the link between empathy and attitudes towards refugees specifically; Cowling et al. (2019) found only 4 studies analysing this relationship in their meta-analysis. When considered as an overall construct, empathy was found to be a non-significant predictor of attitudes, but these studies did not discriminate between cognitive and affective empathy. Elsewhere, Garcia-Vazquez et al. (2022) found that Spanish students who displayed high empathy were more accepting of immigrants from poorer countries, but not of immigrants perceived to not be struggling financially, possibly due to an emotional response to poverty. This suggests that high empathy should lead to increased acceptance of refugees since they are typically fleeing conflict or poor economic situations, a hypothesis which will be investigated in the current study.

Finally, most research to date focusses on inducing cognitive empathy towards a specific group, and in a controlled environment. Shih et al. (2009) found that perspective-taking improved attitudes towards a targeted outgroup, but that this did not generalise to all outgroups. This study will aim to understand whether the simple fact of being *able* to take another’s perspective has a positive impact on acceptance of a general outgroup, since most empirical research to date manipulates perspective-taking in an experimental environment.

**Multilingualism and cognition**

Linguistic relativity, perhaps one of the most controversial theories in linguistics (Leavitt, 2010), posits that the language a person speaks changes the way they think about the world, creating a “language ego” which refers to how a person acts differently or indeed feels like a different person when they speak another language (Guiora et al., 1975). Empirical studies have found that bi- or multilingualism is reliably associated with several cognitive benefits such as increased working memory, ability to consider multiple ideas at once, and increased attentional control amongst others (Adesope et al., 2010; Kharkurin, 2008). It has overall been found that bilinguals are more “cognitively flexible”, that is, able to switch between different mental states (Mepham & Martinovic, 2017).

Furthermore, there is evidence that bilinguals have an advantage in social flexibility, defined as the ability to adapt to different social environments and accurately read social cues (Ikizer & Ramírez-Esparza, 2018; see Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2020, for a review of social advantages of bilingualism). A relationship has been found between multilingualism and open-mindedness (Dewaele and Oudenhoven, 2009) and tolerance of ambiguity (Dewaele and Wei, 2013), but one of the most researched social benefits of bi/multilingualism is increased empathy. Several studies found a significant link between multilingualism and cognitive empathy, especially amongst those who were frequent and advanced users of their languages (e.g. Dewaele & Wei, 2012; Dewaele & Stavans, 2012, Javor, 2016, Rubio-Fernández & Glucksberg, 2012). This study aims to further research in this area by considering the role of cognitive empathy as a mediator of the relationship between multilingualism and acceptance of refugees.

Measures of proficiency and frequency of use of the language such as age of language acquisition, length of exposure to the second culture, and time spent abroad, have all been shown as consistent moderators of the cognitive and social effects of language learning (Kaharkurin, 2008; Dewaele & Wei, 2012; Dewaele & Oudenhoven, 2009; Adesope et al., 2010). Indeed, Luna et al. (2008) suggest that the effects of bi- or multilingualism are only truly felt in those who are also bicultural, where biculturalism suggests that the worldview of the bilingual speaker has fundamentally changed because they internalise two cultures as a result of speaking two languages. Therefore, it will be important to distinguish between those who speak a little of a language (for example through education) and those who are truly bi- or multilingual in this study.

Another potential moderator of the relationship between multilingualism and cognitive empathy is the distance between the languages spoken, measured by the difficulty an English speaker has learning the language (Chiswick & Miller, 2005). Mepham and Martinovic (2017) found that the relationship between multilingualism and cognitive flexibility was strong regardless of the commonality of the language spoken, but Bialystok et al. (2005) found that bilingual children were able to transfer their literacy skills across both languages only when those languages used the same alphabet. This suggests that learning two languages with different alphabetical systems necessitates a new set of (literary) skills, thus increasing cognitive flexibility. To this end, speaking languages further from English, in particular those with different alphabetical systems, can influence the ability of the speaker to interpret the world and others around them in a flexible way. This study will add to this body of research by investigating whether the effects of multilingualism are stronger when the languages learned are linguistically further from English.

**The current study**

The current study aims to fill the gap in existing research on the relationship between multilingualism, empathy, and outgroup acceptance by investigating how speaking more than one language can affect acceptance of refugees and whether this relationship is mediated by the trait of cognitive empathy. Following existing findings, it will also look at the effect of both length of time spent abroad and distance of language from English on refugee acceptance, again mediated by cognitive empathy. Finally, it will determine whether the link between multilingualism and refugee acceptance is contingent on the origin of the refugee, specifically separating responses from those thinking of Ukrainian refugees to those thinking of refugees from elsewhere in the world.

The hypotheses to be investigated in this study are:

**Hypothesis 1a:** Higher language proficiency (henceforth referred to as multilingualism) is associated with higher refugee acceptance, but this differs depending on the salient refugee group.

**Hypothesis 1b:** Higher language proficiency (henceforth referred to as multilingualism) is associated with higher levels of cognitive empathy.

**Hypothesis 1c:** Higher cognitive empathy is associated with higher refugee acceptance.

**Hypothesis 2:** Cognitive empathy mediates the relationship between multilingualism and refugee acceptance, with multilingualism leading to higher cognitive empathy which predicts higher acceptance of refugees.

**Hypothesis 3:** Amongst those who speak another language, a longer amount of time spent abroad leads to higher levels of cognitive empathy, and therefore higher acceptance of refugees.

**Hypothesis 4:** Amongst those who speak another language, the “further” the language is from English, the higher levels of cognitive empathy and therefore the higher acceptance of refugees.

**Method**

**Study design, participants, and recruitment**

This study was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF; <https://osf.io/zfjgx/>).

Study participants were recruited and invited to complete the questionnaire online. Participants were a mixture of undergraduate students recruited through Durham University’s online platform for course credit, acquaintances of the researcher, and members of Prolific, an online community of survey respondents. The survey was hosted for a total of four months on Qualtrics, between February and June 2022.

Prior to obtaining their consent, participants were given information about the purpose of the study, the process of the survey, and storing of results, and told that their data will be kept confidential, that participation is anonymous, and they are able withdraw at any time. Participants then chose whether to consent to the study and were taken to the first page of the questionnaire. An online questionnaire was used in line with previous literature to allow access to a large and diverse pool of bilingual participants to increase ecological validity (Wilson & Dewaele, 2009), and avoid socially desirable answers which can be more common in face-to-face interviews (Heerwegh, 2009), given the sensitive nature of the topic at hand. Completing the questionnaire took an average of 11 minutes. All materials used were given the approval of the Durham University Ethics Committee and can be found in the appendix.

Participants were required to be native to the UK, to have received the majority of their formal education in the UK, and to have lived in the UK for the majority of their life. A power analysis indicated that, in order to guarantee robust analysis, a sample size of *N* = 705 would be required. However, due to time constraints, data collection was stopped after 359 responses were collected. Of the 359 respondents who filled out the survey, 68 were identified as not having completed the survey, either through not reaching the minimum screener requirements or through closing the survey before completion. These were eliminated from the analysis, leaving 291 respondents.

Of the 291 respondents, 66.7% (194) were female, 31.3% (91) male, 1% (3) non-binary or third gender, and 1% (3) preferring not to answer. 60% (176) had a university education, and 34% (100) were currently students. Of the students, 73% (73) were female and 25% (25) male. The average age of respondents was 30.3 years (*SD* = 12.9) and ranged between 18 and 73. The majority of participants were from a White background (267 participants, 92%), with 4% (11) from mixed ethnic backgrounds and 2% from Black and Asian backgrounds.

**Measures**

**Measurement of languages spoken**

Participants recorded their proficiency in languages by first listing up to 6 languages which they spoke, then rating their oral and written proficiency in each language on a 5-point scale. Following Dewaele and Wei (2012), these scores were summed to result in a final proficiency score (maximum score 10 x 6 = 60), which has the advantage of being able to distinguish between those who have limited knowledge of several languages from those who speak few languages fluently.

Proficiency scores ranged between 10 and 41 with a mean of 12.9 (*SD* = 5.04). It was originally planned to split the sample into three groups: Low Proficiency (scores less than 1 SD below the mean), High Proficiency (scores more than 1 SD above the mean), and Medium Proficiency (those remaining), but given that the scores were clustered around a relatively low number resulting in low robustness for the Low and High Proficiency groups, it was decided to instead dichotomise participants into monolingual (score = 10, N = 185) and multilingual (score > 10, N = 106). Of those surveyed, 64% (185) were monolingual, 36% (106) spoke two or more languages, 15% (43) spoke three or more languages, 3% (8) spoke four or more languages, and 1% (3) spoke 5 languages. The most common language spoken was French (50% of multilingual participants), which is unsurprising because it is one of the most commonly taught languages in schools in the UK. The next most common languages spoken were Spanish (39%), German (14%), Portuguese (8%), a Chinese language (7%), and Russian (6%). Other languages spoken by 5 or fewer participants included Italian, Dutch, Welsh, Hindi, and Malay, amongst others.

**Empathy**

Empathy was measured with 16 items taken from the Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (QCAE; Reniers et al., 2011) (see Appendix). Only those items relating to cognitive empathy were included in order to fit the hypotheses (e.g., “I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the other person’s point of view”, “I always try to consider the other person’s feelings before I do something”). Scores were assessed on a self-report scale ranging from 1 (Not at all like me) to 4 (Very like me). Some statements were reverse-coded in order to ensure that a higher score indicated a higher level of empathy. A Cronbach alpha analysis of the scale revealed good internal consistency (Cronbach’s α = .89).

**Attitudes towards refugees**

Perception of refugees was measured using a self-report scale based on that used in Schweitzer et al., (2011) and adapted to the UK context (see Appendix). Participants recorded their responses on a 12-item scale, rating their agreement with the statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Statements assessed prejudice towards refugees pertaining to multiple aspects of life (e.g., “Refugees are displacing UK workers from their jobs”, “Refugees should be able to use the NHS, just as UK citizens do”). Some statements were reverse-coded in order to ensure that a higher score indicated a higher level of refugee acceptance. A Cronbach alpha analysis of the scale revealed good internal consistency (Cronbach’s α = .89).

An open-ended question at the end of the refugee section asked participants to write down which specific refugee groups they were thinking of when answering the questions. This was then manually coded to split those thinking of Ukrainian refugees (*N* = 146) and those thinking of other or general refugees (*N* = 145).

**Control variables**

Control variables to be included in the analysis as covariates were age, gender, religion, ethnicity, education level, and work status.

**Results**

First, the normality of the IV was tested. Results showed a skewed distribution as the majority of participants (*N* = 185) rated themselves as monolingual. Due to this, it was decided to dummy code the variables, splitting respondents into monolingual (language proficiency score = 10) and multilingual (language proficiency score > 10). The distribution of the data is shown in Figure 1, and the descriptive statistics for each group with relation to empathy and refugee acceptance are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

**Figure 1.** Distribution of language proficiency amongst respondents.

Chart, histogram

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**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for monolingual and multilingual groups with relation to empathy.

Table

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**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for monolingual and multilingual groups with relation to refugee acceptance.

Table

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First, Hypothesis 1a posited that higher language proficiency had a positive relationship with refugee acceptance. The direct effect between language proficiency and refugee acceptance was tested including covariates of age, gender, religion, ethnicity, education level, and work status. Full results are shown in Table 3.

The analysis showed that the model was significant, *F*(10, 250) = 10.9, *p* < .001, adjusted   
*R*² = .276. Controlling for all covariates, the analysis indicated a non-significant effect of multilingualism on refugee acceptance (*B* = .097, *p* = .101). However, being male (*B =*-.145, *p* = .016), having a higher (university) education (*B =* .152, *p* = .015), being Christian (*B =* -.306, *p* < .001), older (*B* = .010, *p* = .004) and in employment (*B =* -.174, *p* = .024) all had a significant relationship with refugee acceptance such that female, highly educated, atheist, younger, student, and retired respondents had significantly more positive perceptions of refugees. Furthermore, thinking of Ukrainian refugees elicited significantly higher acceptance of refugees than thinking of other or general refugee groups (*B* = .166, *p* = .004). Therefore, Hypothesis 1a was not fully supported, as only the second part of the hypothesis, that thinking of Ukrainian refugees elicited higher acceptance of refugees than thinking of other or general refugee groups, was supported.

**Table 3.** Correlation table showing partial correlations for all covariates in the model when predicting refugee acceptance.



Hypothesis 1b postulated that higher language proficiency had a positive relationship with cognitive empathy levels. A multiple regression was conducted with multilingualism as independent variable and levels of cognitive empathy as dependent variable, with age, gender, religion, ethnicity, education level, and work status included as covariates. Results are shown in Table 4.

The analysis showed that the model was significant, *F*(9,251) = 3.83, *p* < .001, adjusted   
*R*² = .089. Controlling for all covariates, the relationship between multilingualism and cognitive empathy was non-significant (*B* = -.012, *p* = .830). Gender and work status were significant covariates, such that being male led to lower empathy levels than being female (*B* = -.150, *p* = .006) and having a job led to lower empathy levels than being a student or retired (*B =* -.212, *p* = .003). All other covariates were non-significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 1b was not supported.

**Table 4.** Correlation table showing partial correlations for all covariates in the model when predicting cognitive empathy.



Hypothesis 1c postulated that higher cognitive empathy levels had a positive relationship with refugee acceptance. A multiple regression was conducted with cognitive empathy as independent variable and refugee acceptance as dependent variable, with age, gender, religion, ethnicity, education level, and work status included as covariates. Results are shown in Table 5.

The analysis indicated that the model was significant, *F*(9,251) = 12.4, *p <* .001, adjusted   
*R*² = .282. Controlling for all covariates, cognitive empathy had a significant positive relationship on refugee acceptance (*B* = .240, *p* = .001). Education level, religion, and age were significant covariates, such that having a higher (university) education led to higher refugee acceptance (*B* = .234, *p* < .001), being Christian led to lower refugee acceptance compared to atheists (*B =* -.318, *p* < .001), and being older led to a slight decrease in refugee acceptance (*B =* -.012, *p* < .001). All other covariates were non-significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 1c was supported.

**Table 5.** Correlation table showing partial correlations for all covariates in the model when predicting refugee acceptance.



Hypothesis 2 postulated that the positive relationship between language proficiency and refugee acceptance is mediated by levels of cognitive empathy. A mediation model was employed to assess the relationship between language proficiency, empathy, and refugee acceptance with age, gender, religion, ethnicity, education level, and work status as covariates. The model is shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Mediation model for effect of language proficiency on refugee acceptance.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

*Note:* \*\*\* denotes *p* < .001.

As Figure 2 illustrates, the direct effect between language proficiency and refugee acceptance was non-significant (*B* = .093, *p* = .110), whilst the regression coefficient between cognitive empathy and refugee acceptance was significant. I tested the significance of the indirect effect using bootstrapping procedures. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of 1’000 bootstrapped samples, and the 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was -.003, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from -.032 to .030. Thus, the indirect effect was not statistically significant (*p* = .830). The only significant effect was between cognitive empathy and refugee acceptance (*B =* .241,   
*p <* .001), suggesting that increased empathy leads to increased acceptance of refugees. Therefore Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 postulated that there is a positive relationship between the length of time spent living abroad and refugee acceptance amongst those who speak two or more languages, and that this relationship is mediated by levels of cognitive empathy. A mediation model was employed to assess the relationship between length of time spent abroad, empathy, and refugee acceptance. The model is shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Mediation model for effect of length of time living abroad on refugee acceptance.Diagram

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*Note:* \*\*\* denotes *p* < .001.

As Figure 3 illustrates, the direct effect between length of time abroad and refugee acceptance was non-significant (*B =* .003, *p =* .937), whilst the regression coefficient between cognitive empathy and refugee acceptance was significant. I tested the significance of the indirect effect using bootstrapping procedures. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of 1’000 bootstrapped samples, and the 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was .003, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from -.016 to .030. Thus, the indirect effect was not statistically significant (*p =* .610). Like Hypothesis 2, the only significant effect was between cognitive empathy and refugee acceptance (*B =* .216, *p* = .025), suggesting that increased empathy leads to increased acceptance of refugees. Therefore Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 postulated that there is a positive relationship amongst those who speak more than one language between the distance of language spoken from English and refugee acceptance, and that this relationship is mediated by levels of cognitive empathy. A mediation model was employed to assess the relationship between language distance from English, empathy, and refugee acceptance. The model is shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4.**

Mediation model for effect of language distance from English on refugee acceptance.

Diagram

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*Note:* \* denotes *p* < .05.

The effect of language distance from English on refugee acceptance showed a direct significant positive effect (*B =* .949, *p* = .023), suggesting that speaking a language that is linguistically further from English leads to a more positive perception of refugees. However, the relationship was not mediated by cognitive empathy, since neither the path between language distance and cognitive empathy, nor the path between cognitive empathy and refugee acceptance, were significant. I tested the significance of the indirect effect using bootstrapping procedures. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of 1’000 bootstrapped samples, and the 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was -.161, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from -.467 to .050. Thus, the indirect effect was not statistically significant (*p* = .120). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was also not supported.

**Discussion**

This study investigated whether being multilingual rather than monolingual increases acceptance of refugees, and whether this relationship is mediated by cognitive empathy. It also investigated the impact of specific refugee group, length of time spent abroad, and linguistic distance of language learned from English on refugee acceptance, again mediated by cognitive empathy. Contrary to previous intergroup research, no significant relationship was found between multilingualism and refugee acceptance. There are several reasons why these results could be inconsistent with previous research.

Previous research has focussed on the effects of speaking a language on perceptions of the community who speak that language (e.g. Wright & Bougie, 2007; Rubenfeld et al., 2007). In this study, no group was specified beyond “refugees”, a wide-ranging category. This indicates that language learning could only have social benefits for intergroups relationships between specific groups, rather than for relationships between the ingroup and general outgroups. This has implications for education systems in the UK and the necessity of teaching the languages of stigmatised groups. An interesting finding was that respondents who were thinking of Ukrainian refugees when answering the questionnaire were significantly more likely to have positive perceptions of refugees than those who were thinking of other or general refugees. This reflects the “similar to me” bias where people gravitate towards those who they consider like themselves (Kahnemann & Tversky, 1982); it also speaks to social identity theory which posits that we seek out positive associations for those in our ingroup (Tajfell, 1979), in this case (White) Europeans. This has implications for the representation of refugee groups who are perceived as more “other” in the UK media and by the UK government (Parker, 2015), and could be useful in predicting public response to future refugee crises.

The lack of the link between multilingualism and cognitive empathy could be due to little variation in respondents’ language skills. Previous literature has shown that the effects of bi- or multilingualism are only evident amongst those who are frequent or advanced users of their secondary languages (Dewaele & Wei, 2012; Dewaele & Stavans, 2012; Luna et al., 2008; Kharkurin, 2008), but it was not possible to split these groups out in this research due to sample size. This study reinforces the fact that learning a small amount of a language has limited social benefits, suggesting the need for more holistic language teaching in schools and exposure to language in everyday life in order to truly appreciate others’ perspectives. This could be done by listening to music, watching films, or spending time in the target nation.

That said, no evidence was found that the length of time spent living abroad affects acceptance of refugees, or that it leads to higher cognitive empathy. This also goes against previous research that suggested that length of time spent living abroad was a significant moderator of cognitive and social effects of language learning (Kaharkurin, 2008; Dewaele & Wei, 2012; Dewaele & Oudenhoven, 2009; Adesope et al., 2010). Much other research has found that intergroup contact is a significant predictor of perception of outgroups (e.g. Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Kotzur et al., 2018, Wright & Tropp, 2005). In this study, intergroup contact was not measured, and length of time spent abroad is not necessarily a direct proxy for it; it could be that someone has lived abroad but spent most of the time socialising with people of their own country or language, for example. This could have implications for refugees themselves, as it suggests that simply spending time in a foreign country is not enough to form relationships with the host people. Refugee integration programmes should focus on the quality of contact between refugees and people of the host nation, and programmes such as the study abroad programme at UK universities should work to encourage true integration of students into the host nation’s community through intergroup contact.

This study did find a significant positive relationship between cognitive empathy and refugee acceptance, which adds to previous literature which demonstrates that manipulating perspective-taking can lead to more positive perceptions of outgroup members (e.g. Batson et al., 1997; Vescio et al., 2003; Todd & Galinsky, 2014). However, this research suggests that not only the state, but the trait of cognitive empathy can have impacts on the way we perceive others, and exposure to the target group is not needed to elicit empathy. Other empirical studies which have focussed on stigmatised or dehumanised groups have exposed participants to stimuli featuring a member of the outgroup, thus humanising them (e.g. Batson et al., 1997; Vescio et al., 2003). This study indicates that priming empathy is enough to elicit positive perceptions of outgroups, and so suggests that we should aim to encourage perspective-taking in everyday life in order to foster a more accepting environment. It also validates a finding that has been reported across multiple countries, but not specifically in the UK, adding to the breadth of research on this topic.

Finally, Hypothesis 4 stated that speaking a language that is linguistically further from English would lead to higher acceptance of refugees, mediated by cognitive empathy. This hypothesis was not supported, but a significant direct link between the distance of the language from English and refugee acceptance was found. This suggests that learning a difficult language has social benefits, enabling a person to be more accepting of outgroups regardless of whether they speak the same language or not. This adds to the small body of research on this topic which has previously provided conflicting results (e.g. Mepham & Martinovic, 2017; Bialystok et al., 2005) and highlights the need for future exploration of this area, since it is clear that factors other than empathy must be affecting this relationship. These results could have implications for education in the UK, as they would suggest that a focus on languages more linguistically distant from English (such as Chinese, Greek, Arabic, and other Asian languages as found by Chiswick & Miller (2005)) could promote a more inclusive culture.

**Limitations and directions for future research**

There are some limitations to this study which should be addressed in future studies.

Firstly, due to time constraints, the study employed a cross-sectional design which does not enable conclusions of a causal nature. Therefore, it is not possible to conclude the direction of any noted effects. For example, it is possible that having higher acceptance of refugees leads to higher levels of cognitive empathy, not the other way around as suggested in this study. Future research could aim to address this limitation by employing a longitudinal design, but it is also recognised that this is difficult in the area of language learning since it would involve beginning research in childhood in most cases. It is also difficult to pinpoint when the development of empathy as a trait begins, again making longitudinal designs difficult and suggesting that empirical designs could be better suited.

Another limitation to this study is the sample size which did not allow separation of respondents into three groups of language proficiency as originally intended. Future studies could aim to recruit more participants in order to be able to make this distinction and find more nuanced results. However, it is true that several previous studies have started out distinguishing between monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual respondents, before merging the latter 2 groups due to a lack of significant differences between them (e.g. Adesope et al., 2010; García-Vazquez et al., 2022; Dewaele & Wei, 2012). This suggests that splitting respondents into 3 groups could have had limited impact on results.

Thirdly, this study relied on self-reported measures of empathy, language level, and refugee acceptance. However, this was in line with existing research which use self-reported measures of these constructs. Self-reported measures of empathy are commonly used and well-validated (Neuman et al., 2015), whilst there has been shown to be a correlation between explicit and implicit measures of prejudice (Hoffman et al., 2005). Finally, self-reported measures of language have been shown to accurately represent true abilities in previous studies (e.g. Dewaele & Wei, 2012; Kharkurin, 2008).

The final limitation of this study is that the sample was not representative of the national population of the UK. The sample had a disproportionately high number of female, white, and highly educated respondents, with a large proportion of respondents also being students. Future studies could aim to recruit a more representative sample or focus on underrepresented groups in research such as non-Whites and people with lower levels of education.

This research also signals several areas for future research. Since the relationship between empathy and refugee acceptance was not influenced by multilingualism, future research should aim to investigate other factors which could drive the development of empathic traits. Future studies could also investigate whether learning the language of refugees affects perceptions of them, since other studies have shown that learning the language of a specific outgroup enhances positive feelings towards them (e.g. Wright & Bougie, 2007; Rubenfeld et al., 2007). More research should be done on the perception of Ukrainian compared to other refugees in order to validate the reasons for more positive perceptions of the former amongst UK citizens. Finally, future research should further investigate the cognitive and social impacts of learning a language that is linguistically distant from the mother tongue, both amongst English speakers and native speakers of other languages, since research in this area remains limited.

**Conclusion**

This study contributed to the literature surrounding multilingualism, cognitive empathy, and refugee acceptance. Although a significant relationship was not found between the three variables, support was found for the direct link between cognitive empathy and refugee acceptance. This furthered existing research on the topic of empathy and outgroup acceptance by presenting the results in a UK context, validating the effect of cognitive empathy as a trait rather than state, and linking the effects of cognitive empathy to refugees as a specific group. It also provided some of the first insight on perceptions of Ukrainian refugees and how people respond to refugees of different origins and ethnicities. This has implications for the portrayal of refugees in general and could be useful in predicting the UK response to future refugee crises. In addition to this, a link was found between a language’s distance from English and refugee acceptance, highlighting a relatively new area of research which should be explored more and could have implications for educational policy in the UK.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A – Information Sheet**

Dear Participant,

Welcome to our study ‘*The perception of refugees in the UK’* and thank you for your interest in our research. You are invited to take part in a scientific study which is led by Laura Christen, Durham University, laura.christen@durham.ac.uk. This study has received ethical approval from the Department of Psychology Ethics Sub-committee of Durham University, UK.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part, it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The aim of this study is to investigate how people in the UK perceive refugees. We are interested in whether certain personality or language traits affect how you think about refugees.

**Why have I been invited to take part?**

We have invited adults living in the UK to take part in this study.

**Do I have to take part?**

Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time by closing the browser window, without giving a reason.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

This study will take place entirely online. You will be asked to complete a few sets of questions regarding the topics mentioned above. This should take about 15 minutes.

You may omit any questions you do not wish to answer throughout the entire study.

**Are there any potential risks involved?**

No physical discomfort will occur. However, if you do experience any discomfort, you are free to withdraw at any point.

You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions in the survey. If this does happen, please be aware that there are general counselling resources available through the NHS website: <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/>

**Will my data be kept confidential?**

All data will be collected using a GDPR compliant survey software called Qualtrics. All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. No personal data will be collected, which means that your participation is anonymous. This means we will not be able to link you to your answers after you have participated. If the data is published it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours.

**What will happen to the results of the project?**

After the completion of the survey, you will not be able to request a withdrawal of your data. This is because participation is anonymous, which means that we will not be able to identify the data you provided after submission. No personal data will be shared, however anonymised data may be used in publications, reports, presentations, web pages and other research outputs. At the end of the project, anonymised data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes.

All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after publication of the project data.

**Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?**

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to Laura Christen via email at [laura.christen@durham.ac.uk](mailto:laura.christen@durham.ac.uk). If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via Durham University.

**Laura Christen, Durham University, laura.christen@durham.ac.uk**

**Appendix B – Participant Consent Form**

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the project are, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please confirm the statement below to indicate your agreement to the following:

* I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for this project.
* I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.
* I understand who will have access to the data provided, how the data will be stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.
* I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
* I understand that anonymised (i.e., not identifiable) versions of my data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes.
* I understand that I will be asked about my personal perceptions of refugees and some personality traits.
* I agree to take part in this project.

I understand and agree with the statements above and am happy to proceed.

* Yes
* No

**Appendix C – Participant Debrief**

**Thank you very much for participating in our study! You have now reached the end of the survey!**

**1. What was the purpose of the study?**

Thank you for taking part in this study. With this study, we intend to investigate whether being bilingual or multilingual affects your perception of refugees in the UK. In particular, we’re interested in whether there is a link between being bi- or multilingual and being able to empathise with other groups, and whether this affects how you react to refugees. We are also interested in whether this varies according to whether you have lived abroad, and the types of language (e.g. European languages, Asian languages) you speak.

Thank you very much for helping us to address these questions with your participation!

We recognise that this can be an uncomfortable topic for some people. If you felt uncomfortable answering any of the questions in this survey and feel the need to talk to someone, please go to the NHS website where there are counselling services available: <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/>

Every participation helps us to understand the phenomena we investigate a little better. Therefore, if you feel you know someone who might be interested in participating in this study as well, feel free to share the survey link with them.

**2. What will happen to my data and how can I find out about the results?**

At the end of the project, anonymised data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes. You may contact me via [laura.christen@durham.ac.uk](mailto:laura.christen@durham.ac.uk) and a general summary of the findings will be sent to you once the study has been completed and results have been obtained.

Thank you for taking part in this study. Should there be any further inquiries, please do not hesitate to contact me at [laura.christen@durham.ac.uk](mailto:laura.christen@durham.ac.uk).

**Appendix D – Background & Language Level Questionnaire**

What is your gender?

* Male
* Female
* Non-binary
* I identify as (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Prefer not to answer

How old are you?

* \_\_\_\_ years *[open answer with only numeric values accepted]*
* Prefer not to answer

Did you undertake the vast majority of your formal education in the UK?

* Yes
* No

Which is your highest level of education?

* Primary education
* Lower secondary education
* Upper secondary education
* Bachelor’s or equivalent level
* Master’s or equivalent level
* Doctoral or equivalent level
* Other / Prefer not to answer

What is your current or former occupation?

* Professional or managerial (e.g., lawyer, university teacher, company manager)
* Non-manual skilled (office-based employment; e.g., secretary, administrator, assistant manager)
* Skilled manual work (e.g., electrician, hairdresser, plumber)
* Semi-skilled manual work (e.g., shop assistant, driver, waiter/waitress)
* Unskilled/casual work (e.g., labourer, cleaner, fruit-picker)
* Student
* Retired
* Prefer not to answer

What is your religious affiliation?

* Christian (any denomination)
* Jewish
* Muslim (Sunni or Shia)
* Hindu
* Buddhist
* Other religious affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* No religious affiliation
* Prefer not to answer

Many people use the terms „right“ or „left“ to describe different political opinions. If you think about your own political attitudes, where would you allocate yourself on the following scale?

* 0 - „left“ to 10 - „right“
* Prefer not to answer

Are you native to the UK?

* Yes
* No

Have you lived abroad (outside of the UK)?

* Yes, I have spent most of my life living elsewhere
* Yes, for several (2+) years
* Yes, for 1 year
* Yes, for less than a year
* No

Which languages do you know? Please list them in the order that you learnt them and leave any remaining lines blank. For First Language, you can give more than one if you were brought up in a multilingual family (L1a, L1b):

* First language(s) (L1) \_\_\_\_\_\_
* Second language (L2) \_\_\_\_\_\_
* Third language (L3) \_\_\_\_\_\_
* Fourth language (L4) \_\_\_\_\_\_
* Fifth language (L5) \_\_\_\_\_
* Other languages (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_\_

On the scale from 1 (minimal fluency) to 5 (full fluency), how do you rate yourself in oral and written skills in all of your languages?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Oral | Written |
| L1a |  |  |
| L1b (if applicable) |  |  |
| L2 |  |  |
| L3 |  |  |
| L4 |  |  |
| L5 |  |  |

**Appendix E – Cognitive Empathy Questionnaire**

*All questions are scored on a scale of 1-4:* *1(strongly disagree), 2(slightly disagree), 3(slightly agree), 4(strongly agree)*

I can pick up quickly if someone says one thing but means another

I am good at predicting what someone will do

I am quick to spot when someone in a group is feeling awkward or uncomfortable

Other people tell me I am good at understanding how they are feeling and what they are thinking

I can sense if I am intruding, even if the other person does not tell me

I can tell if someone is masking their true emotion

I am good at predicting what someone will do

I sometimes find it difficult to see things from another person’s point of view

I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision

I sometimes try to understand other people or groups better by imagining how things look from their perspective

When I am upset at someone, I usually try to “put myself in their shoes” for a while

Before criticizing a person or group, I try to imagine how I would feel if I was in their place

I find it easy to put myself in somebody else’s shoes

I can usually appreciate the other person’s viewpoint, even if I do not agree with it

I always try to consider the other person’s feelings before I do something

I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both

**Appendix F – Attitudes towards refugees in the UK Questionnaire**

*All questions are scored on a scale of 1-4:* *4(strongly agree), 3(slightly agree), 2(slightly disagree), 1(strongly disagree)*

Refugees get more from the UK than they contribute

The children of refugees should have the same rights to attend schools in the UK as British children do

Refugees have increased the tax burden on British citizens

Refugees are displacing UK workers from their jobs

Refugees should be able to use the NHS, just as UK citizens do

Refugees pose a terrorist threat to the UK

Refugees entering the UK illegally should be sent back to their country of origin

Refugees should attempt to integrate themselves into UK culture and society as much as they can

Refugee intake enriches rather than undermines UK culture

I can imagine myself collaborating with refugees (whether that be in the workplace, socially, in sports, etc.)

I would not mind refugees living in my residential area

I sympathise with the situation of refugees

When you were answering these questions about refugees, who were you thinking of? Please try to indicate specific groups. [Open ended question]