



# Teacher evaluations of interethnic bullying of an Arab student: The role of perceiving refugees as a threat or benefit

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## Abstract

Interethnic bullying that targets ethnic minority students has serious consequences for the lives of victimized students. Teachers' evaluations of the bullying are critical because teacher intervention can stop bullying and improve the adjustment of victimized students. Because the literature has documented partially overlapping biases against people of Arab ethnicity and people with refugee backgrounds, this study investigated whether teachers' attitudes toward refugees play a role in their evaluations of the interethnic bullying of an Arab student. Teachers ( $n=373$ ; 77% female) who participated in the study filled the Threats–Benefits Inventory (TBI) that measured two types of attitudes toward refugees (perceiving refugees as a threat and perceiving refugees as a benefit) and evaluated a hypothetical vignette of interethnic bullying targeted at an Arab student. SEM analysis, controlling for gender, age, and contact with refugees, indicated that teachers' attitudes toward refugees were not associated with their perceptions of the interethnic bullying as wrong or with their willingness to intervene. However, viewing refugees as a source of high threat or low benefit was consistently associated with lower recognition of the negative outcomes of the interethnic bullying. Moreover, a greater willingness to intervene positively associated with female gender and increasing age. The study suggests that teachers' attitudes toward refugees may contribute to underestimating negative outcomes of interethnic bullying among students. To foster appropriate evaluations of interethnic bullying, teacher education should aim to promote understanding of different marginalized groups and to reduce biases against people with refugee backgrounds.

**Keywords** Attitudes toward refugees · Bullying · Ethnic biases · Developmental intergroup perspective · Peer exclusion · Teachers' attitudes

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## 1 Introduction

Teachers' professional tasks include handling interethnic bullying, i.e., incidents in which the students who bully and the students who are victimized belong to different ethnic groups (Caravita et al., 2020). This form of bullying largely stems from ethnic biases and has been found to present a considerable risk to the psychosocial health of victimized students (Juvonen et al., 2019; Sapouna et al., 2023; Thijs et al., 2014). Research has shown that students who are victimized by bias-based forms of bullying suffer from more severe psychological, social, and academic difficulties than do students who are victimized by non-bias-based bullying (e.g., Latina & Bayram Özdemir, 2021; Mulvey et al., 2018; Priest et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2012). Studies that examine the differences in the prevalence of interethnic victimization suggest that ethnic minority students are more likely to be victimized than ethnic majority students (for reviews, see Fandrem et al., 2021; Priest et al., 2013; Strohmeier & Dogan, 2012; Xu et al., 2020).

Teachers play a critical role in promoting positive interethnic relationships and reducing interethnic bullying (Juvonen et al., 2019), and they have the capacity to help victimized students adjust (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2021). Research has shown that while the quality of teacher–student relationships plays a particularly strong role in bullying among students with ethnic minority backgrounds (ten Bokkel et al., 2023), teachers hold negative biases toward ethnic minority students (Costa et al., 2021) and often have unfavorable attitudes toward students with cultural minority (Glock et al., 2022) or refugee backgrounds (Terzi et al., 2019). In lay discourse, people often do not have a clear understanding of the diversity of immigrants and differences between various immigrant groups (Bilgen et al., 2023; Graf et al., 2023; Verkuyten, 2021). Although people of Arab descent represent only one group of refugees, Arab ethnicity is viewed as a typical refugee ethnicity, and significant overlaps have been documented between biases toward immigrant groups, including refugees, and ethnic and religious biases toward people with Arab and Muslim backgrounds (Rexhepi, 2018; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). Therefore, the links between attitudes toward refugees and teachers' readiness to address interethnic bullying that targets Arab students should be examined. The present study explores whether teachers' preparedness to address interethnic bullying that targets Arab ethnic minority youth could be corroborated by negative attitudes toward refugees or fostered by positive attitudes toward refugees.

Intervening in bullying is a nontrivial task. Despite extensive efforts at teacher education, teachers do not seem fully prepared to appropriately evaluate bullying incidents (Craig et al., 2000; Sokol et al., 2016). This problem is particularly pronounced in bullying by peer exclusion. Teachers evaluate this form of bullying as less serious than verbal and physical bullying, and they are less willing to intervene in it (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Intervention in interethnic bullying by peer exclusion may be even more complex because teachers themselves may hold and diffuse ethnic biases (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2021; Fandrem et al., 2021; Mazzone et al., 2018; Ortega et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers typically come

from ethnic majorities and feel less confident and effective when working with students of other ethnicities (Kumar & Hamer, 2012). More research is needed to identify the specific educational needs of teachers in this area.

The literature points to two important features of teachers' evaluations of bullying incidents. It has been suggested that the extent to which the teacher views a concrete incident as unfair (Kollerová & Killen, 2021) and harmful in terms of student outcomes (Yoon & Kerber, 2003) matters. The effects of context on these moral considerations in cases of interethnic bullying have not been systematically investigated. Research on intergroup peer exclusion, however, provides compelling evidence that the application of moral reasoning to interethnic bullying interactions is shaped by perceptions of others as outgroup members and attitudes toward these outgroups (for a review, see Rutland & Killen, 2015). Thus, to understand the factors that may compromise teachers' readiness to address the interethnic bullying of ethnic minority youth, it is important to study teachers' evaluations of these types of classroom exchanges. To help fill this research gap, this study focused on the unexplored role of teachers' attitudes toward people with refugee backgrounds. Specifically, it examined whether attitudes toward people with refugee backgrounds are associated with teachers' (in)appropriate responses to interethnic bullying that targets Arab students, who represent a numerical minority in the school population. This question has become highly relevant because migration (including forced migration from war-torn countries) has increased the ethnic diversity of schools. Arab ethnicity was chosen for this investigation because Arab students have been subjected to negative biases (e.g., Hitti & Killen, 2015; Tabbah et al., 2012), and Arab ethnicity is commonly perceived as representative of refugees in some regions of Central and Eastern Europe (Rexhepi, 2018).

## 1.1 Biases against Arab youth contextualized

Youth of Arab descent represent an understudied group of students who experience unfair treatment from peers and adults in many regions due to the perception that they are members of a threatening ethnic outgroup (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2009; Gieling et al., 2010; Hitti & Killen, 2015; Tabbah et al., 2012). As evidenced by various media messages, the factors that fuel social tensions against this group vary by region. In more commonly studied regions, such as the USA, social tensions are strengthened by the perceived connection between Arab ethnicity and terrorism (e.g., Das et al., 2009; Shaheen, 2003), whereas in less studied regions, such as parts of Europe, the perceived connection between minority ethnicity and refugee background are assumed to play a role (European Commission, 2017). Although refugees come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Arab ethnicity was perceived as the predominant ethnicity of refugees in several European regions (Rexhepi, 2018). Moreover, prior studies have demonstrated that people with refugee backgrounds and people with Muslim backgrounds are commonly portrayed negatively and conflated in the mass media (Jelínková, 2019).

Because refugees have been subjected to unfavorable perceptions and misrepresentations in public discourse and media (Bilgen et al., 2023), a spillover of negative biases toward refugees to people with Arab backgrounds could be expected. Therefore, an investigation that addresses behaviors toward students of Arab descent should be contextualized within a specific cultural and chronological setting. To complement existing insights, the present study was conducted in 2018 in the Czech Republic, a less frequently studied part of Central Europe that is among the regions that, prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, were characterized by a low presence of foreigners (Czech Statistical Office, 2019) and a low focus on the multicultural education of teachers (Rowan et al., 2021). At the time of data collection, there were only 2186 refugees in the Czech Republic, and their most common countries of origin were Ukraine, Cuba, Georgia, Armenia, and Uzbekistan (UNHCR, 2023). However, this region has high levels of negative stereotypes and biases against refugees, both in media communication and in the common attitudes of people (Graf et al., 2023; Jelínková, 2019). The media have been found to play a critical role in shaping lay beliefs about various marginalized groups with which people have limited contact, including people with ethnic minority or refugee backgrounds (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Verkuyten, 2021).

Previous research has indicated that in the EU, citizens tend to perceive marginalized groups of people with immigrant backgrounds and Muslims as largely overlapping groups (Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). A similar perception can be expected with regard to groups of people with refugee and Arab backgrounds, especially in regions where multicultural awareness is low (Rowan et al., 2021). The actual numbers of these groups are very low, and the mass media is the main power that shapes public perceptions (Graf et al., 2020). In some countries of Central Europe, including the Czech Republic, the media have largely relied on a stereotypical portrayal of refugees as Arab refugees from the Middle East (Rexhepi, 2018). Moreover, immigrants, including refugees, have been portrayed as presenting a high threat to EU societies (Bilgen et al., 2023), especially since the beginning of the “refugee crisis” in 2015, which is characterized by an increasing influx of forced migrants from various regions, including the Middle East (Duarte et al., 2016; Verkuyten, 2021). In this cultural context, a spillover effect can be expected in which attitudes toward refugees could overlap with thoughts about people of Arab descent. Although teachers are trained professionals, they are not immune to ethnic and social biases. Less empathetic reactions to injustices faced by Arab people were previously documented in people who adopt prejudicial attitudes (Kteily et al., 2015). It is therefore worth investigating whether views on refugees affect teachers’ capacity to respond to interethnic bullying that targets Arab students.

## 1.2 Developmental intergroup perspective

The theoretical framework of the developmental intergroup perspective postulates that evaluations of intergroup peer dynamics, such as exclusion, involve considerations of ingroup and outgroup memberships and attitudes toward these outgroups (Rutland & Killen, 2015). The role of ingroup/outgroup considerations

and preexisting attitudes seems especially influential when people evaluate complex or unclear situations, such as intergroup peer exclusion (Rutland & Killen, 2015). Previous research has consistently shown that negative implicit biases toward ethnic minority students are present in various domains of teachers' attitudes (Costa et al., 2021), including teachers' expectations of student achievement (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007) and their proclivity to discipline students (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).

Specifically, teachers have been found to spend less time communicating with students with immigrant backgrounds (Fraser & Walberg, 2005) and to criticize them more often (den Brok et al., 2009) than students without immigrant backgrounds. Moreover, teachers may evaluate ethnic ingroup and outgroup peer dynamics inappropriately by overestimating students' tendency to self-segregate based on their ethnic background (Crozier & Davies, 2008). Because people who evaluate complex or ambiguous incidents of peer exclusion are more likely to judge behaviors according to their preexisting attitudes toward groups (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005), it is important to identify attitudes toward groups that might be associated with teachers' evaluations of interethnic bullying that targets ethnic minority youth.

Attitudes toward various immigrant groups have been analyzed primarily in association with the concerns of the citizens of receiving countries regarding their own material and economic welfare (Bilgen et al., 2023; Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2020). Recently, a model that covers multiple types of perceived threats as well as multiple types of perceived benefits has been proposed. Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016) created the threats-benefits model, which postulates that key attitudes toward immigrants include appraisals of how threatening and how beneficial they are for the receiving society. According to the theory of prejudice (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), the threats-benefits model conceptually distinguishes realistic threats/benefits (referring to safety and resources) from symbolic threats/benefits (referring to cultural values). The perceived threats included in the model include the negative influence of immigrants on the economy of the receiving country, the physical welfare of its citizens, the social cohesion of society and its modernity. The perceived benefits include the positive influence of immigrants on the economy, physical welfare, and cultural diversity of the receiving society and the humanitarian situation in the world. This model allows for a uniquely comprehensive investigation of attitudes toward immigrants and postulates that both perceived threats and a lack of perceived benefits can become driving forces of biased behaviors toward immigrants. This model has been applied in the area of social work (e.g., Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016, 2020) and may also be useful in educational research.

### 1.3 The present study

The present study was conducted in the Czech Republic, a Central European country. It focused on the evaluations of teachers who were asked to evaluate a hypothetical incident of interethnic bullying. In the incident, a student with a majority Czech ethnicity repeatedly bullied a student with a minority Arab ethnicity because he

or she “did not fit in”. This study assessed the effects of attitudes toward refugees (perceived threats and perceived benefits associated with refugees) on evaluations of interethnic bullying incidents because many ethnic majority group individuals in some European regions assume that refugees and people with Arab ethnicity partially overlap (Rexhepi, 2018; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008).

Specifically, we hypothesized that teachers who perceived refugees as posing a high threat and low benefit would evaluate interethnic Arab bullying in a manner that made them less willing to intervene in the incident, less likely to view the incident as wrong, and likely to perceive fewer negative outcomes for the target. Findings on the role of gender and age in teachers’ views on bullying are mixed (Burger et al., 2015; Poteat et al., 2019; Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011; Yoon et al., 2011). Thus, these demographic variables were controlled for to ensure that potential differences between male and female teachers or between younger and older teachers did not distort the main effects of interest. The control variables also included teachers’ personal contact with refugees because the frequency of contact with outgroup members has been found to be associated with behaviors and attitudes toward the outgroup (Walsh & Tartakovsky, 2021). Controlling for possible effects of personal contact with refugees allowed a more objective assessment of the role of attitudes toward refugees. In summary, this study aimed to expand knowledge of which attitudes play a role for teachers in the difficult task of evaluating interethnic bullying targeting an ethnic minority students. This knowledge could improve teacher education efforts that aim to increase teachers’ capacity to handle interethnic bullying.

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Teachers ( $N = 373$ ; 76.68% female) aged 22 to 67 years ( $M = 44.48$ ;  $SD = 10.24$ ) who taught 6th–to 9th—graders participated in the study. The study was conducted in 106 schools in the Czech Republic, where most students (90%) attend 6th to 9th grades in elementary schools and the remaining students attend these grades in secondary schools. To represent this system, the sample included both elementary school teachers (85.79%) and secondary school teachers (14.21%). Regarding gender and age, the sample was generally representative of the population of elementary and secondary school teachers in the Czech Republic (Maršíková & Jelen, 2019). No official statistics on the ethnic and socioeconomic composition of the population were available at the time of this study. The sample was predominantly composed of ethnic Czechs and teachers who viewed themselves as members of the middle class. Specifically, the participants reported White Czech ethnicity (97.86%), Slovak ethnicity (1.34%) or another ethnicity (0.80%). The socioeconomic background of the participants was as follows: low income (1.07%), low middle income (17.69%), middle income (66.76%), upper middle income (12.33%), and upper income (2.14%).

## 2.2 Procedure

The data were retrieved from a larger project ( $n=740$ ) that focused on teachers' evaluations of peer relations. To answer the research question of the present study, half of the 740 participants were randomly assigned to evaluate an interethnic bullying incident. The procedure of the larger project followed a two-stage clustered stratified design. First, the Czech Republic was stratified by its 14 regions. Second, within each region, several schools were randomly selected as clusters to proportionately represent the distribution of schools in the regions. The 6th–to 9th-grade teachers at the selected schools were invited to participate in the study and provided informed consent. The participation rate was 38%. The invited teachers received information that the survey was anonymous and would focus on peer relations among students. A gift voucher (with a value corresponding to 10 EUR) was offered to the participants. The procedure complied with the ethical standards of the institution of the first author.

## 2.3 Measures

### 2.3.1 Evaluations of interethnic bullying

The present study aimed to explain teachers' evaluations of interethnic bullying that targeted an Arab student. To register the evaluations, a hypothetical vignette with a classroom incident of bullying was modified from previous research (Garandeau & Lansu, 2019). The vignette described peer exclusion that met the criteria for bullying, namely, repetitiveness, intentionality, and power imbalance (Olweus, 1993). The excluder was of the majority White Czech ethnicity, and the excluded student was of the minority Arab ethnicity. The genders of the excluding and excluded students were counterbalanced. Ethnic and gender characteristics were distinguished by the pronouns and Czech/Arab names. The version of the vignette in which a Czech boy excluded an Arab boy was as follows:

*The teacher is asking students to form groups of four to work together on a project. Petr is sitting close to Hassan and two other boys. He tells the two other boys, "Let's do it together," and completely ignores Hassan. When Hassan asks if he can join them, Petr tells him, "No, we don't want you in our group." The other two boys are silent. Hassan finds himself sitting alone and feeling miserable. Petr has treated Hassan like this many times before because he thinks that Hassan will not fit in with them. After reading the vignette, the teachers expressed their evaluations of the incident in the following areas.*

### 2.3.2 Willingness to intervene

First, the participants reported how willing they would be to actively intervene in the bullying. The question was, *If such a situation happened during your lesson, how likely would you be to intervene in the situation?* The following 5-point Likert

scale was used: 1 (label: 0%), 2 (label: 25%), 3 (label: 50%), 4 (label: 75%), and 5 (label: 100%). Because the distribution of the willingness to intervene score was skewed, the score was dichotomized. Given that the incident described in the vignette presented a clear case of bullying in which teachers are certainly expected to intervene, a score of 0 was used to indicate low willingness to intervene (0–75% likelihood of intervention), and a score of 1 was used to indicate high willingness to intervene (100% likelihood of intervention). Most of the participants reported high willingness to intervene (69.17%), while some reported low willingness to intervene (30.83%).

### 2.3.3 Wrongfulness of bullying

The second perspective on bullying that was assessed was the perceived wrongfulness of the bullying in response to the following question: *Was it alright or not alright that Hassan was prevented from joining the group?* The Likert response scale included responses: 1 (*Alright*), 2 (*Somewhat alright*), 3 (*Neutral*), 4 (*Somewhat not alright*), and 5 (*Not right at all*). The wrongfulness of bullying score was dichotomized with 0 used for low wrongfulness (the responses *alright*, *somewhat alright*, *neutral*, *somewhat not alright*) and 1 for high wrongfulness (the response *not right at all*). High wrongfulness was reported by 52.82% of the respondents, and low wrongfulness was reported by 47.18%.

### 2.3.4 Negativity of bullying outcomes

The third perspective on bullying assessment was awareness of the negative outcomes of bullying. The teachers responded to the following question: *What do you think will be outcomes of the situation when Hassan was rejected to join the group?* on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (*Very negative*), 2 (*Rather negative*), 3 (*Neutral*), 4 (*Rather positive*), 5 (*Very positive*). The question was reverse scored so that higher scores corresponded to greater negativity.

### 2.3.5 Attitudes toward refugees

The main predictors of interest, perceived threats and perceived benefits from refugees, were measured using a 36-item shortened Czech version of the Threats–Benefits Inventory (TBI) (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016). The participants reported the threats and benefits they perceived from refugees on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Given the highly negative connotations of the term *refugees* in the context of the Czech Republic mass media and public discussion, the Czech TBI asked teachers about their attitudes toward refugees using the equivalent term *humans who fled their country*. The Czech TBI included perceived threats that were measured using 4 subscales: *economic threats* (e.g., draining welfare funds; 8 items), *physical threats* (e.g., committing violent crimes against Czechs; 7 items), *social cohesion threats* (e.g., looking, dressing and speaking differently from Czech citizens and thus damaging the feeling of cohesion in Czech society; 5 items), and *modernity threats* (e.g.,



bringing nonprogressive rules of raising children, for example, physical punishment; 4 items). The TBI also included 3 subscales on perceived benefits: *economic benefits* (e.g., bringing new knowledge and skills needed in the Czech economy; 4 items), *cultural diversity benefits* (e.g., bringing a new culture, for example, food, music, and art, and thus enriching Czech culture; 4 items), and *humanitarian benefits* (e.g., helping to save lives; 4 items). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) confirmed a three-level factor structure of the instrument established by Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016) (see Results for details).

The 36-item Czech TBI was developed using a back-translation procedure and an adaptation of the original inventory to the cultural context of the Czech Republic and the time possibilities of the online survey. Due to time constraints for data administration, the scale was shortened by removing the original 5-item physical benefits subscale (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016) because the majority of the items of the subscale were positive formulations of the physical threats scale. Furthermore, to align the inventory with the Czech cultural context, the Czech version did not include an item referring to the Jewish past (from the original humanitarian benefits subscale) or an item referring to the enemies of Israel (from the original physical benefits subscale) (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016). A final adaptation of the scale was that, in line with further revisions of the TBI (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2020), the economic threats subscale was enriched by an item about refugees overloading the medical system, and the cultural benefits subscale was enriched by an item on increased tolerance of diversity.

### 2.3.6 Contact with refugees

As a control variable, the frequency of personal contact with refugees was measured. A mean score of two of the following items was used: *How often do you personally meet humans who fled their country?* and *How often do you personally speak with humans who fled their country?* The items captured two related facets of personal contact, namely, personal meetings and personal communication, and were highly correlated (0.82,  $p < 0.001$ ). The Likert response scale options were 1 (*Almost never*), 2 (*Seldom*), 3 (*Sometimes*), 4 (*Quite often*), and 5 (*Almost always*).

## 2.4 Statistical analyses

The analyses were conducted in two consecutive steps. First, we performed CFA to confirm a three-factor structure of Czech TBI to set the 3rd-order factors, perceived threats and perceived benefits, as latent constructs in the final structural equation models (SEMs). Next, we computed the main analyses that involved a complex SEM with three dependent variables (willingness to intervene, wrongfulness of bullying, and negativity of bullying) and several independent variables: a latent variable for perceived threats or perceived benefits and observed control variables (gender, age, contact with refugees). Given the limited sample size and complexity of the model, the model was computed separately for perceived threats and perceived benefits to ensure sufficient power of the analyses. The analyses were computed in Mplus

7.3. For the preliminary CFAs, the maximum likelihood (ML) estimation technique was used, and for the main SEM, the weighted least squares estimator (WLSMV) was used because two of the dependent variables (willingness to intervene and wrongfulness of bullying) were categorical (dichotomized).

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Preliminary confirmatory factor analysis of the TBI

First, we performed a 3rd-order CFA to determine whether the Czech version of the TBI had the same factor structure as the original instrument. Following Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016), items were grouped into seven factors, comprising the four higher-order factors of realistic threats (economic threats and physical threats), symbolic threats (social cohesion threats and modernity threats), realistic benefits (economic benefits) and symbolic benefits (cultural diversity benefits and humanitarian benefits) and the two main 3rd-order factors, threats and benefits. The first model did not achieve an acceptable model fit because the CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR values did not meet the thresholds recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). The model was modified. Specifically, correlations between the residual errors of three pairs of items (pair 1: *Humans who fled their country drain our welfare funds* and *Humans who fled their country overload social services, which then have fewer resources to help Czechs in difficulty*; pair 2: *Many humans who fled their country are involved in theft, burglary, and robberies* and *Humans who fled their country commit many violent crimes against Czechs*; pair 3: *Humans who fled their country commit many violent crimes against Czechs* and *Humans who fled their country are involved in a lot of drinking and drugs*) were added to the model because their content and modification indices suggested that they could be related. After these modifications, the final model reached an acceptable model fit,  $\chi^2(452)=993.57$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (CFI=0.914; TLI=0.906; RMSEA = 0.058; SRMR=0.054). CFA indicated that perceived threats and perceived benefits had a strong negative correlation of  $-0.69$  ( $p < 0.001$ ).

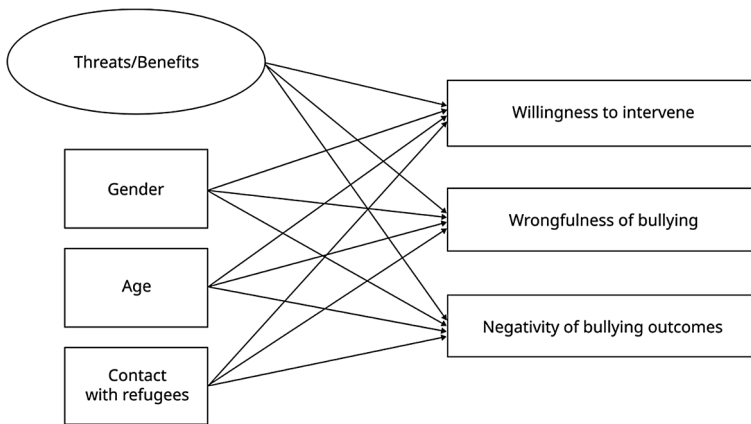
#### 3.2 The effects of perceiving refugees as threats or benefits on evaluations of interethnic bullying

Descriptive statistics for all study variables are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics and correlations for variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlations					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Individual level ( <i>N</i> =373)								
1. Willingness to intervene	0.69	0.46						
2. Wrongfulness of bullying	0.53	0.50	.39**					
3. Negativity of bullying outcomes	4.00	0.58	.19**	.25**				
4. Contact with refugees	1.91	0.91	.05	.04	-.06			
5. Perceived threats	2.69	0.67	-.02	.05	-.15**	.04		
6. Perceived benefits	2.93	0.61	-.00	.03	.11*	.04	-.69***	

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



**Fig. 1** Conceptual model for evaluations of interethnic bullying. Latent constructs are shown in ellipses, and observed variables are shown in rectangles

The main analysis included two separate SEMs that predicted a set of three evaluations of bullying: the willingness to intervene, the wrongfulness of bullying, and the negativity of bullying outcomes. One of the models included perceived threats, and the other included perceived benefits. The other predictors set as control variables in both models were the teachers’ age, gender and contact with refugees. The main goal of the SEM was to verify the effects of perceived threats and perceived benefits on evaluations of bullying while controlling for demographic variables (age and gender) and contact with refugees (see Fig. 1 for the conceptual model). A summary of the effects can be seen in Table 2. Table 2 shows that for the willingness to intervene and the wrongfulness of bullying, we found no statistically significant effects of perceived threats or perceived benefits.

Confirming our hypotheses, both perceived threats and perceived benefits had significant effects on the negativity of outcomes. The effect of perceived threats was negative, and the effect of perceived benefits was positive. A comparison of

**Table 2** Summary of effects found in the SEM for Evaluations of bullying (willingness to intervene, wrongfulness of bullying, and negativity of bullying outcomes)

	Model including perceived threats				Model including perceived benefits				
	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Willingness to intervene									
Perceived threats	-0.21	-0.09	0.17	-1.27	0.01	.09	0.09	1.12	.261
Gender	0.40	.17	0.16	2.47	0.40	.17	0.16	2.47	.013
Age	0.02	.15	0.01	2.01	0.02	.15	0.01	2.01	.045
Contact with refugees	0.05	.04	0.09	0.59	0.05	.04	0.09	0.59	.557
Wrongfulness of bullying									
Perceived threats	-0.01	-0.00	0.16	-0.05	0.00	.00	0.08	-0.00	.998
Gender	0.21	.09	0.16	1.32	0.21	.09	0.16	1.32	.188
Age	0.01	.09	0.01	1.33	0.01	.09	0.01	1.33	.183
Contact with refugees	0.05	.04	0.08	0.61	0.05	.04	0.08	0.61	.545
Negativity of bullying outcomes									
Perceived threats	-0.20	-0.15	0.08	-2.61	0.10	.18	0.04	2.70	.007
Gender	-0.01	-0.01	0.07	-0.17	-0.01	-.01	0.07	-0.17	.864
Age	-0.00	-0.02	0.00	-0.39	-0.00	-.02	0.00	-0.39	.694
Contact with refugees	-0.05	-0.07	0.04	-1.23	-0.05	-.07	0.04	-1.23	.218
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> for willingness to intervene	.07				.07				
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> for wrongfulness of bullying	.02				.02				
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> for negativity of bullying outcomes	.03				.04				

the standardized coefficients for both models suggests that the effect of perceived threats was approximately two times stronger than the effect of benefits. Gender and age, set as control variables, showed no statistically significant effects on the wrongfulness of bullying or the negativity of bullying outcomes but contributed significantly to the explanation of the willingness to intervene. A greater willingness to intervene was found for women and older teachers than for men and younger teachers. The third control variable, contact with refugees, had no significant effects on the models. Overall, the  $R^2$  ranged from 0.02 to 0.07. Adopting the thresholds recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999), the RMSEA values were acceptable (0.042 for both examined models), while the CFI and TLI values were slightly below the recommended levels (model with perceived threats: CFI=0.857 and TLI=0.843; model with perceived benefits: CFI=0.856 and TLI=0.842). We considered the model fit for both models acceptable given the complexity of the model and weak associations between the variables (see Table 1 and 2).

## 4 Discussion

The study tested whether teachers' evaluations of a hypothetical incident of classroom interethnic bullying of an Arab student were associated with teachers' attitudes toward refugees, namely, perceiving threats and benefits associated with refugees. This issue was examined because in lay discourse, people often lack a precise understanding of the diversity of immigrants (Bilgen et al., 2023; Graf et al., 2023), and in regions of Europe, the lay belief has been documented that groups of Arab individuals and immigrants, including refugees, overlap (Rexhepi, 2018; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). The novel findings of the present study are that teachers who viewed refugees as a source of high threats or low benefits were less aware of the negative outcomes of interethnic bullying involving an Arab student as the victim. Interestingly, no effects of attitudes toward refugees were found for teachers' willingness to intervene in interethnic bullying or for the evaluation of interethnic bullying as wrong. These findings expand the current understanding of processes that may contribute to hindering or fostering teachers' appropriate responses to interethnic bullying.

The descriptive results for the three evaluations of bullying revealed a novel pattern of teacher evaluations. While more than two-thirds of the participants were highly willing to intervene in the incident, only approximately half of the participants considered this straightforward interethnic bullying incident *not right at all*. Moreover, on average, the teachers evaluated the outcomes of the incident as only *rather negative*. The high willingness of teachers to intervene in the interethnic bullying incident seems encouraging and suggests that in line with current knowledge (e.g., Bayram Özdemir et al., 2021; Fandrem et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020), teachers believe that these incidents deserve intervention and perceive their responsibility to intervene. On the other hand, the somewhat limited awareness of the wrongfulness of ethnic bullying and its negative outcomes suggests that teachers may not fully understand the unfairness and harmful nature of interethnic bullying. This is a concerning result given that research has consistently documented

serious negative consequences of ethnic bullying, which is often fueled by negative stereotypes about ethnic minorities (for a review, see Sapouna et al., 2023). Future research could examine whether students are aware that their teachers might not be fully ready to appropriately evaluate interethnic bullying that targets students from marginalized ethnic backgrounds.

Although gender and age were used only as control variables in the present study, the effects found are worthy of attention. Gender and age differences were identified in teachers' willingness to intervene, which can be considered closest to the actual behavior of the three evaluations. The greater willingness of female and older teachers to intervene confirms and expands existing knowledge. Compared with male teachers, female teachers were previously found to be more consistent and active in handling bullying (Poteat et al., 2019; Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011; Yoon et al., 2011). The current study confirmed this result in the context of interethnic bullying. The current results also suggest that research examining teachers' intervention in bullying should not omit teachers' age because older or more experienced teachers are more willing to intervene (Burger et al., 2015). This outcome supports the notion that older teachers could provide encouragement and mentoring to their younger colleagues with regard to readiness to respond to bullying (Kollerová et al., 2021). Overall, the models that included attitudes toward refugees as the main variables of interest and the control variables explained relatively low portions of the overall variance in teachers' evaluations of interethnic bullying. Thus, future research could consider including a broader array of predictors that were previously found to be relevant, such as attitudes toward cultural/ethnic diversity (Civitillo et al., 2018), implicit attitudes toward ethnic minority students (Costa et al., 2021), and beliefs about handling bullying (Burger et al., 2015).

#### 4.1 The role of perceived threats

Perceived threats from refugees had no significant effects on the willingness of teachers to intervene in interethnic bullying that targeted an Arab student. This is an encouraging outcome. We may speculate that negative attitudes toward refugees are unrelated to teachers' readiness to intervene because teachers are aware that their professional role requires them to be willing to intervene in interethnic bullying that targets ethnic minority students. These results are in line with past studies that have shown that teachers typically report the intention to actively respond to bullying when evaluating hypothetical incidents of bullying (Burger et al., 2015; Strohmeier et al., 2021). However, previous research has shown that teachers may hold religious biases and that the biases might shape the way that teachers respond to peer exclusion (Glock et al., 2022). Our study did not confirm that negative attitudes toward refugees play a role in teachers' readiness to intervene in interethnic bullying by peer exclusion. However, it should be noted that the design we used allowed us to map only basic associations between attitudes toward refugees and responses to interethnic bullying.

Contrary to our expectation, the effects of perceived threats from refugees were not associated with evaluations of the wrongfulness of interethnic bullying that targeted an Arab student. This simple evaluation of bullying may be straightforward for teachers and cannot be diminished by potential negative biases toward refugees. However, a recent systematic review by Sapouna and colleagues (2023) concluded that teachers hold a wide array of negative stereotypes that may be related to their capacity to conduct various professional tasks. Moreover, the teachers in our study may have been inclined to provide socially desirable responses because intervention in interethnic bullying may be perceived as a socially sensitive issue, and people tend to provide socially desirable responses to these issues (Houwer, 2006). To verify and complement the present findings, future studies should use a wider array of methods, preferably measures that allow implicit biases to be captured (Costa et al., 2021).

In line with our hypothesis, viewing refugees as a source of threats was negatively associated with recognizing the negative outcomes of interethnic bullying that targets youth of Arab descent. This finding complements research documenting biases against various marginalized groups, including ethnic minority students and refugee students, in the areas of communication, achievement, and discipline (Costa et al., 2021; den Brok et al., 2009; Fraser & Walberg, 2005; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). The finding that teachers' view of refugees as a source of threat has an effect on their evaluation of situation when an Arab student being bullied by a Czech student is a call for action. So far, little attention has been given to teachers' attitudes about Arab students in European regions that have a very small minority of students of Arab descent. However, bias toward even a small number of students is detrimental to all students. Schools should be places where all students are respected and treated both equally and equitably (Rutland & Killen, 2015).

We speculate that these findings may partially reflect the fact that many EU citizens perceive people with immigrant backgrounds, including refugees, and people with Arab backgrounds as constituting highly overlapping groups (Rexhepi, 2018; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). In line with this notion, teachers' perceptions of the boundaries between the marginalized groups of people of minority Arab ethnicity and people with a refugee background may be blurred. Notably, in many European regions, there is still little attention to fostering teachers' multicultural competences (Rowan et al., 2021). In the past decade, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a large portion of refugees in parts of Central and Eastern Europe were refugees from the Middle East who were of Arab descent (Rexhepi, 2018). The present study suggests that prejudicial attitudes toward refugees could explain teachers' tendency to underestimate the negative outcomes of the interethnic bullying of Arab students.

#### 4.2 The role of perceived benefits

The effects of perceived benefits from refugees, similar to the effects of perceived threats discussed above, were not found to be associated with the willingness to intervene or the wrongfulness of bullying. Previous research has suggested that

teachers tend to express willingness to actively address bullying when presented with hypothetical scenarios (Burger et al., 2015; Strohmeier et al., 2021). This basic readiness to intervene and straightforward evaluation of interethnic bullying may not be fostered when teachers hold positive attitudes toward refugees. Future research could examine whether the reactions of teachers vary for targeted students with different ethnic backgrounds.

The results indicate that intergroup processes matter; specifically, positive attitudes toward refugees are associated with greater awareness of the harmfulness of interethnic bullying that targets ethnic minority students. The investigated perceptions included benefits to the economy, cultural diversity, and the humanitarian situation. These are critical areas that were previously found to play a role in the behaviors of other professionals, such as social workers (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016), and should be critically discussed with regard to teacher education. Thus, teacher education should attempt to not only mitigate negative attitudes toward refugees but also foster positive attitudes, such as appreciating the benefits associated with incoming refugees. This implication for teacher education expands a recent call to educate the public by highlighting the diversity of immigrants, particularly by specifying distinct immigrant groups in public communication and highlighting the positive contributions that these distinct immigrant groups bring to host societies (Graf et al., 2023). Our study complements existing insights into how prejudicial attitudes limit appropriate responses to injustices experienced by people of Arab descent (Kteily et al., 2015) and shows that this approach could be useful in fostering teachers' readiness to intervene in interethnic bullying.

### 4.3 Limitations and directions for future research

The present study has many strengths, including the use of a nationally representative sample of teachers, the combination of hypothetical vignettes and questionnaire data, and the adoption of a rigorous hierarchical SEM strategy of analysis. The first limitation of the study is that it investigated only one ethnic minority target group, students of Arab descent. The Arab ethnicity was chosen to examine how teachers evaluate interethnic bullying targeted at a student who is a member of an ethnic minority subjected to high levels of negative stereotypes (e.g., Gieling et al., 2010; Tabbah et al., 2012). However, it should be noted that the study did not include contact with students with Arab backgrounds who could have entered the examined relationships. In addition to investigating multiple ethnic minority groups, future research could compare how different categories intersect, such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES). For example, an analysis incorporating interplay between both the ethnicity and gender of both the excluding and excluded students could further enhance the outcomes of the current study. Prior research has demonstrated that teachers may perceive male students as being more resilient and that these gender biases may intersect with ethnic biases (Kollerová & Killen, 2021). Similarly, perceptions of outgroup threat could be compared for students from upper-income Arab groups and low-income Arab groups to determine other factors that contribute to threat. Although experimental research has shown that teachers'



evaluations of students are influenced more strongly by ethnic biases than SES biases, studying the potential overlap of these two areas is beneficial because ethnic minority students are often stereotyped as having low SES (Glock & Kleen, 2023). Similarly, ethnicity and religion could be examined because both Arab students and refugees may be stereotyped as being Muslim (Glock et al., 2022; Jelínková, 2019); thus, the findings of the present study may also be shaped by hidden religious biases. Moreover, the design used in this study only allowed us to map basic associations between attitudes toward refugees and responses to interethnic bullying targeting Arab students and did not examine whether the reactions of teachers varied for different ethnicities of targeted students.

Second, the results may be limited by self-selection. Because the sample comprised teachers who agreed to participate in an online survey focusing on peer relations among students, it may overrepresent teachers interested in this topic, who may be more inclined to condemn bullying and intervene in it than the general population of teachers. Even though participation reached 38%, which is relatively high for an online survey, the results should be replicated in other samples that might be less susceptible to self-selection bias. Finally, due to the high ethnic homogeneity of the Czech Republic, almost all participating teachers (98%) were ethnic Czechs. Therefore, in this study, it was not possible to examine the roles of teacher ethnicity and its (in)congruence with the ethnicity of bullying or victimized students. In future research, it would be beneficial to investigate whether teachers' evaluations of interethnic bullying are more negative when the teacher and the victimized student are of different ethnicities since the incongruence was found to be associated with greater bias in evaluations and greater misunderstandings in teacher–student relations (Glock & Schuchart, 2020; Thijs et al., 2012).

#### 4.4 Practical implications

Because the findings suggest that attitudes toward refugees may compromise teachers' capacity to acknowledge the negative outcomes of interethnic bullying that targets ethnic minority students, it is recommended that teachers receive stronger multicultural training that mitigates stereotypes and negative attitudes toward refugees. Negative attitudes toward refugees have been recognized as a topical societal issue in many countries worldwide (Verkuyten, 2021). The effectiveness of the existing training on combating negative stereotypes is limited, but promising approaches include counterstereotypical examples (FitzGerald et al., 2019), engagement with diverse students, and discussions reflecting the importance of cultural diversity and respectful treatment of all students (Civitillo et al., 2018). A key goal is to promote inclusive classrooms where students from different ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds are equally respected by teachers (Ortega et al., 2020; Thijs et al., 2012).

Importantly, this study implies that educational efforts should foster more positive attitudes toward refugees through critical reflections of negative media bias against

marginalized groups (Boomgaarden & Vliegthart, 2009; Graf et al., 2020). The activities need to be tailored to the specific regional context. In the Czech Republic where the present study was conducted, the number of Arab students is rather low, and only a minority of teachers have had personal contact with this target group. The findings also underscore the notion that teacher education should raise awareness about the harmfulness of interethnic bullying so that teachers fully acknowledge the negative effects of bullying regardless of their attitudes. Importantly, teachers are only one part of the educational and school-based environment for children and adolescents. Promoting inclusive classrooms requires training administrators, educators, and staff as well as teachers for a coherent and integrated approach.

## 5 Conclusions

Addressing interethnic bullying that targets ethnic minority students presents a professional challenge, and this study shows that teachers' evaluations of the interethnic bullying can be influenced by attitudes toward refugees. While the teachers in this study were aware of the wrongfulness of interethnic bullying that targeted youth of Arab descent and acknowledged the important role of teacher intervention regardless of their attitudes toward refugees, they failed to fully recognize the negative outcomes of bullying when they held unfavorable attitudes toward refugees. In contrast, they were more aware of the harmfulness of bullying when they held positive attitudes toward refugees. Thus, teacher education should consider that in regions with high ethnic and social homogeneity and low multicultural education, such as in the Czech Republic where the study was conducted, attitudes toward refugees may affect teachers' capacity to handle interethnic bullying targeting ethnic minority students. Promoting teachers' multicultural competence and positive attitudes toward refugees may foster their preparedness to appropriately evaluate and respond to interethnic bullying in classrooms. This is a critical step given the increasing numbers of refugees (UNHCR, 2023) and the increasing ethnic diversity of schools worldwide (Bilgen et al., 2023).

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**Availability of data and materials** Data will be made available on request.

**Code availability** Code will be made available on request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have not conflict of interest.

**Ethics approval** The procedures complied with the ethical guidelines of the authors' institution and the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its amendments. The institutional board of the first authors' institution approved the project.

**Consent to participate** All participants expressed their consent to participate using an online informed consent.

**Consent for publication** All authors agreed with the content of the manuscript and all gave explicit consent to submit it to the Social Psychology of Education. As well, they obtained consent from the responsible authorities at the institution where the work has been carried out, before the work was submitted.

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