

# The Way They See Us: Examining the Content, Accuracy, and Bias of Metaperceptions Held by Syrian Refugees About the Communities That Host Them

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## Abstract

Discourse about people seeking refuge from conflict varies considerably. To understand what components of this discourse reach refugees the most, we examined refugees' perceptions of how their host communities perceive them (i.e., intergroup metaperceptions). We sampled refugees who fled Syria to Jordan, Lebanon, Germany, and the Netherlands. Focus groups with 102 Syrian refugees revealed that the most prevalent metaperception discussed by refugees was that they thought their host communities saw them as threatening (Study 1). Surveys with 1,360 Syrian refugees and 1,441 members of the host communities (Study 2) found that refugees' metaperceptions tracked the perceptions held by their host communities (i.e., they were accurate), but there was also a significant mean difference, indicating that they were positively biased. Analyses further tested the roles of evaluative concern and group salience on metaperception accuracy, as well as differences in accuracy and bias across country and perception domain.

## Keywords

refugees, intergroup metaperceptions, threat, intergroup relations

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At the time of writing, there are nearly 30 million refugees, with roughly two thirds displaced from a handful of countries. The Syrian Civil War that erupted in 2011 contributed 6.8 million refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021), while more than 5 and 6 million fled turmoil in Venezuela and Ukraine, respectively (UNHCR, 2022). More than a decade into the Syrian conflict, refugees still struggle with poverty, food insecurity, access to health care, and access to work opportunities (UNHCR, 2021). Few have returned to Syria, as it is deemed unsafe, with those who have returned facing similar economic hardships, persecution, and human rights abuses as when they left (Human Rights Watch, 2021). And so, more than a decade later, the refugees remain in countries that were supposed to be their temporary homes, and public discourse about their character and intentions continues.

This discourse about refugees is often polarized (Hawkins et al., 2018). Some advocate for refugees' human rights and compassion toward them. Majorities within host countries think the unique talents and skills imported by refugees strengthen host societies (Gonzalez-Barrera & Connor, 2019). Other voices portray refugees negatively. Many

members of the public saw Syrian refugees as a threat to national security (Smith, 2017; Wike et al., 2016). Discourse also commonly portrays refugees as “bogus”—people who merely pose as refugees to enter the country illegitimately (Goodman et al., 2017; Lynn & Lea, 2003).

Whereas these narratives could be countered with empirical evidence regarding actual motivations of refugees (e.g., Jasko et al., 2021), they are splashed across social media and news headlines, making refugees an audience to this discourse. The present research sought to identify and examine the various ways in which refugees perceive they are described by members of the communities that host them.

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Perceptions of this nature—how we think the outgroup sees our ingroup—have been labeled intergroup metaperceptions (Frey & Tropp, 2006). We also examined the extent to which these metaperceptions were accurate estimations of actual host community's perceptions.

## Contents of Intergroup Metaperceptions

Much of the metaperception research studies how we think people see us as individuals, but more recent scholarship examined how we think people see our social groups (e.g., Frey & Tropp, 2006). Frey and Tropp (2006) proposed that people form and rely on intergroup (vs. interpersonal) metaperceptions when group membership is salient, for instance, in times of intergroup conflict or when one belongs to a numerical minority. Intergroup metaperception research on meta-stereotypes often identifies context-specific traits that form the content of these perceptions. For instance, research on meta-stereotypes of religious and non-religious individuals focused on constructs like honesty, altruism, and hedonism (Saroglou et al., 2011), research on aboriginal Canadians looked at meta-stereotypes of rebelliousness and lack of ambition (Vorauer et al., 1998), and research on adolescent Black women examined meta-stereotypes of sexual promiscuity and manipulateness (Townsend et al., 2010).

A different way to look at metaperceptions, however, is through the universal dimensions of person perception: warmth and competence (Fiske, 2018; Fiske et al., 2002, 2007). Warmth captures the perceived interpersonal orientation of a social group—for example, their friendliness, helpfulness, morality, and trustworthiness. Competence captures perceived ability—for example, their intelligence, skill, and efficaciousness. People view many social groups ambivalently, that is, high on one construct and low on another. Groups high in both warmth and competence are society's default reference groups like major religions and ethnicities. Groups traditionally portrayed as low in competence and warmth are the homeless, poor, and immigrants. This last category often includes refugees as a generic social group (e.g., Kotzur et al., 2019), although perceptions differ substantially for different refugee subgroups. For instance, refugees fleeing for economic reason were rated as colder than refugees who fled due to violence (Kotzur et al., 2017). Likewise, Germans rated Syrian refugees as significantly warmer than refugees from Afghanistan, Eritrea, and North Africa (Kotzur et al., 2019).

Intergroup metaperceptions can feasibly be about any topic relevant to intergroup relations. The literature reflects this, examining metaperceptions of prejudice, dehumanization, and even interest in intergroup contact, to name a few (e.g., Kteily et al., 2016; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Rudman & Fetterolf, 2014; Stathi et al., 2020). Of interest in the present research are metaperceptions of threat. People in developed nations often portray refugees as an active threat to the

ingroup's way of life and discuss them using metaphors of threat, disaster, invasion, or contagion (Grove & Zwi, 2006; McManus, 2020; Turton, 2003). These narratives discuss the realistic and symbolic threat (e.g., Stephan & Stephan, 2000) posed by refugees and should thus inform metaperceptions. Symbolic threat is the extent to which a group is perceived as threatening the values and culture of one's group. Realistic threat captures tangible threats that arise between competing groups (i.e., competing goals, threats to physical/economic well-being).

## Intergroup Metaperception Accuracy

The metaperception literature has operationalized accuracy in two distinct ways that we refer to as *accuracy* and *bias* (Donnelly et al., 2022). Accuracy is measured by looking at the linear relation (e.g., positive slopes in regression or correlation coefficients) between metaperceptions of one group and the perceptions of another group. In the present context, for instance, higher accuracy is inferred when higher scores on refugees' metaperceptions (e.g., how refugees think host community members perceive them) correspond to higher scores on the actual perceptions expressed by the host community about refugees. This approach has its roots in person perception (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993) and is thus more commonly used in research on interpersonal metaperceptions and is relatively underutilized in the group perception literature. Bias, on the other hand, compares mean values of metaperceptions to perceptions. It measures whether there is a systematic positive or negative gap between how people think they are perceived and how they are actually perceived. In the present context, refugees' metaperceptions would be, for instance, positively biased if refugees underestimated how negatively they were perceived by the host community. This approach has its roots in social psychology (Donnelly et al., 2022) and is the approach of choice to intergroup metaperceptions.

The study of bias and accuracy developed independently in different subfields of psychology, so researchers typically examine either bias or accuracy, but not both (Donnelly et al., 2022). However, it is theoretically possible for metaperceptions to be both accurate and biased. For instance, Lees et al. (2022) found that metaperceptions of people who engaged in morally objectionable behavior tracked onto actual perceptions of their behavior (accuracy), but also overestimated how positively they were perceived (bias). In the current project, we likewise investigated both accuracy and bias. We examined whether various domains of metaperceptions among refugees were correlated with the perceptions held by host community members. We also identified possible gaps between metaperceptions and perceptions that would indicate bias.

Much of the past literature on intergroup metaperception accuracy was conducted with political partisans. It shows that members of one political party overestimate how

negatively they are viewed by those in the opposing party (Lees & Cikara, 2020, 2021; Mernyk et al., 2022; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Ruggeri et al., 2021). To some extent, this is expected, as people tend to expect outgroup members to evaluate their ingroup negatively (e.g., Krueger, 1996; Sigelman & Tuch, 1997; Vorauer et al., 1998; Waytz et al., 2014), and metaperceptions thus rely heavily on negative stereotypes. Importantly, however, this research finds that social context is important. When intergroup relations between political partisans were framed as cooperative (vs. competitive), for instance, bias decreased (Lees & Cikara, 2020). Likewise, a study conducted within the context of Israeli and Palestinian relations showed that bias occurred as a function of the extent to which one believed their social group benefited politically (Saguy & Kteily, 2011).

Outside the political realm, intergroup metaperceptions do not consistently overestimate negativity, for instance, when studying different sexes (Lees & Cikara, 2020) or age groups (Finkelstein et al., 2013), and religious versus non-religious individuals (Saroglou et al., 2011). Recent research offers some insight into why this might occur. When asked to think of the political outgroup, political partisans recall stereotypes of engaged ideologues, as opposed to political moderates, whose attitudes invite reciprocal hostility (Druckman et al., 2022). In other contexts, exemplars of the outgroup that come to mind might be less polarizing or extreme.

Research has additionally examined constructs that should moderate accuracy and bias effects. Theoretically, two circumstances that would be expected to negatively bias intergroup metaperceptions are (a) when one is highly identified with their social group (Frey & Tropp, 2006; Westfall et al., 2015) and (b) when one is concerned with being evaluated by the outgroup (Vorauer et al., 2000). Both situations should increase the salience of one's intergroup metaperceptions, and thus increase negativity bias, as ingroup members are more likely to expect outgroup members to judge them negatively (e.g., Krueger, 1996).

Regarding the Syrian refugees under study in the present research, accuracy and bias are also likely to differ as a function of the country in which refugees reside. Syrian refugees have sought asylum in more than 130 countries, four of which were studied here: Lebanon, Jordan, Germany, and the Netherlands. The first three of these countries have taken in the second, third, and fourth largest numbers of Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2020; see Supplemental Materials). Each context presents a unique dynamic between refugees and their host communities that could affect the nature of the perceptions held by both groups and their accuracy.

For instance, consider differences between the refugee experiences in Lebanon and Jordan relative to Germany and the Netherlands. The Syrian refugees themselves are more similar to the majority populations in ethnicity, religion, culture, and so on in the Middle East than in Europe. On the contrary, Lebanon and Jordan host significantly more refugees per capita than the other countries (Karasapan, 2022).

This likely increases intergroup interactions between host community members and Syrian refugees. It also increases the burden, economic and otherwise, of hosting refugees, such as what befell Lebanon's public service sector in the early years of the Syrian conflict (World Bank, 2013). The living conditions, including poverty, food insecurity, and legal restrictions on work, are harsher in Jordan and Lebanon (e.g., Housari, 2019; UNHCR, 2022; UNICEF et al., 2021). This contrasts with Europe, where the economic conditions of Syrian refugees are generally satisfactory, yet because of differences between them and the host community, refugees may be more likely to be "othered" in a manner that portrays them as culturally threatening and could lead to greater hostility (also see Supplemental Materials).

## The Present Research

The present research reports the results of two studies with 2,903 participants in Lebanon, Jordan, Germany, and the Netherlands. Study 1 reports qualitative analyses of focus groups with Syrian refugees. These analyses ascertained the contents of refugees' metaperceptions, with the aim of identifying the domain(s) most prevalent in refugees' estimation of how their host communities perceive them. Study 2 reports quantitative analyses of surveys conducted with both Syrian refugees and members of their host communities. Analyses attempted to bridge the gap between the accuracy and bias literatures by assessing both. We specifically tested for metaperception accuracy, directional bias, and whether bias and accuracy were influenced by other relevant variables.

Both studies were part of a larger project. We only report analyses using constructs pertinent to the present research questions. Analyses using these data have not been previously published. Information on constructs that were not analyzed and data and analysis code for Study 2 are available at Open Science Framework (OSF; <https://osf.io/rg82d/>). Data were analyzed using MAXQDA (Study 1) and R (Study 2). Studies were not preregistered.

## Study 1

Study 1 analyzed focus groups with Syrian refugees to ascertain the content of their metaperceptions and identify which constructs were most prevalent in their thinking. In the focus groups, participants discussed how they thought members of their host communities perceived Syrian refugees. We analyzed these discussions for the presence of nine perception domains. We did not have a priori predictions about which of the domains would be most prevalent.

## Method

**Participants.** Twelve focus groups were conducted with 102 (51 female) Syrian refugees. Four focus groups were

conducted in each of Jordan and Lebanon. Two focus groups were conducted in each of Germany and the Netherlands. Guidelines suggest that two to four focus groups per country should be sufficient to reach a minimum of 80% saturation (e.g., Guest et al., 2017; Morgan, 1997). The mean number of participants per focus group was 8.5 (range, 4–10). Guidelines recommend conducting focus groups with six to 12 participants, with social scientists advocating for numbers hovering around 8 (e.g., Flick, 2007; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). Participation occurred in 2019.

Demographic information was collected for age, sex, city of origin, year of migration to the host country, and socioeconomic status. Participants indicated socioeconomic status by identifying which rung on a 10-rung ladder best reflected their current position in society. The top rung (10) represented those with the highest status, and the bottom rung (1) represented those with the lowest status. Status was measured twice: once referring to their status in the host country, and again referring to their status in Syria prior to migrating.

Ages ranged between 18 and 61 ( $M = 34.66$ ,  $SD = 9.93$ ). Gender was split evenly (51 men, 51 women). Participants originated from 15 cities across Syria, with most hailing from Damascus (31%), Homs (22%), Aleppo (14%), Idlib (8%), and Hama (7%). Participants migrated to their host countries between 2011 and 2019, with 89% arriving between 2012 and 2016. Participants reported higher socioeconomic status in Syria ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 2.86$ ) than in their host countries ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 2.23$ ).

**Procedure.** Researchers informed participants of the procedures and risks prior to attaining consent. Focus groups were audio recorded. We did not record participant names and instructed participants to refrain from using proper names. The focus groups were semi-structured, such that moderators could deviate from the question order and use their own probing questions. Male and female participants were in separate focus groups to avoid pressures, cultural or otherwise, that might reduce the women's willingness to speak honestly in the presence of men. All participation occurred in Arabic. At the end of the session, participants received monetary compensation for their participation.

Focus group recordings were transcribed, translated into English, and content analyzed. Transcripts were coded for nine domains. To capture constructs from the stereotype content model, we coded for competence, and disaggregated warmth into sociability and morality because they have been shown to play distinct roles in person perception (Brambilla et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2007). We also coded for cleanliness. Cleanliness is a component of the sanctity foundation of moral reasoning that often applies to perceptions of out-group members and immigrants feared of importing disease (Haidt, 2012). Finally, we coded for dangerousness and vulnerability. Trepidation about refugees and immigrants often centers on the fear that those entering their country are violent. The vulnerability code captured whether host

community members saw refugees as victims or traumatized individuals. The remaining three descriptors captured perceptions about the socioeconomic status of refugees, host community members' wishes for the refugees to leave (vs. stay in) their country, and the perceived impact of refugees on society.

We coded the valence of each descriptor to indicate the direction of the perception. For instance, competence could be coded as competent or incompetent. Likewise, perceptions of impact were coded to indicate whether refugees felt they were perceived as making society a better place versus threatening and hurting society in some way. The negative pole of this code captured the importance of threat perceptions, which, as reviewed earlier, are critical in intergroup relations and hostility. The resultant coding scheme contained nine domains and a total of 18 codes to capture the poles of each domain (see Supplemental Materials).

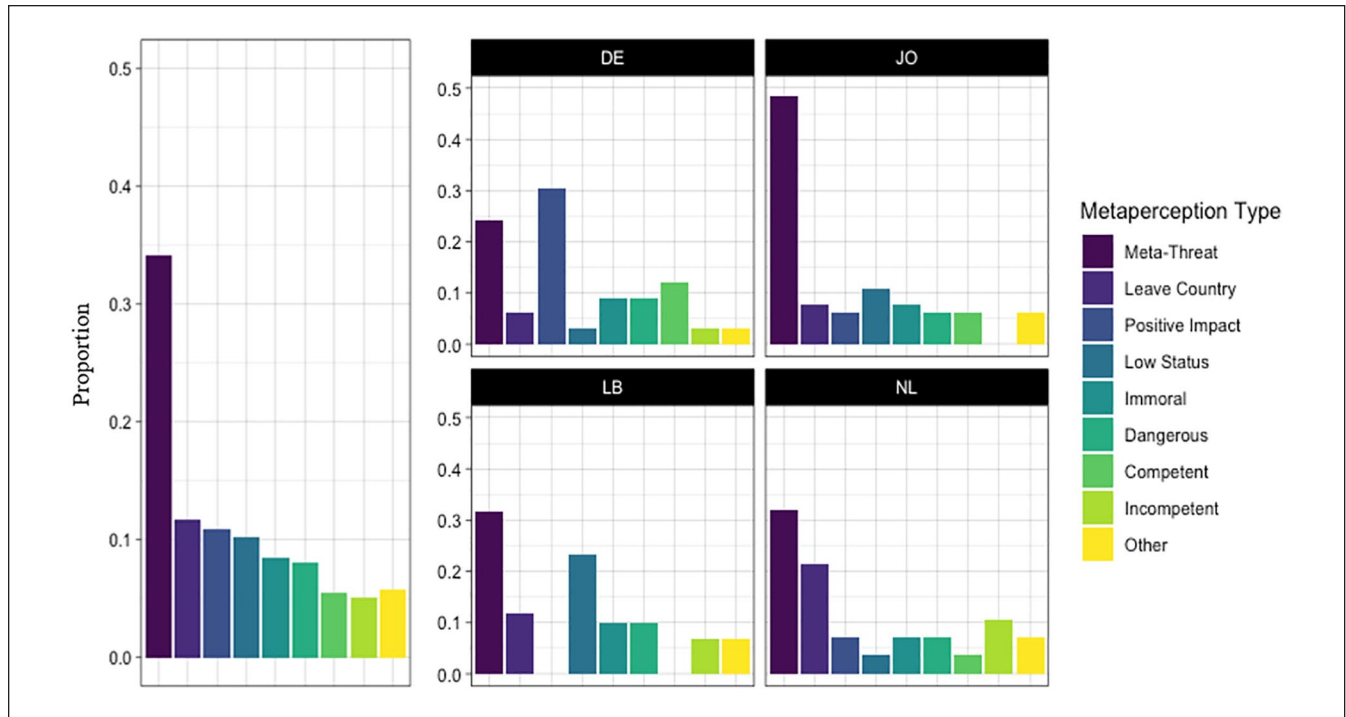
After identifying the necessary codes, we created a coding manual and trained a team of undergraduate researchers on its usage. These researchers were blind to hypotheses. Researchers worked in pairs. We assigned each pair the same transcript, which they coded individually and sent to the first author for review. Inter-rater agreement (Cohen's  $\kappa$ ) was calculated. The first author met with the researchers to discuss and provide feedback. The researchers used that feedback to individually recode the entire transcript and resend to the first author for review. This process continued until inter-rater agreement reached a minimum of .80 (Landis & Koch, 1977). At this point, the researchers reconciled all remaining disagreements. One transcript, however, was reconciled after reaching  $\kappa = .79$ . Transcripts ranged between 6,019 and 13,371 words ( $M = 8,495.50$ ,  $SD = 2,086.40$ ). The number of coded segments (for all codes, not just those reported here) ranged between 243 and 517 ( $M = 391.83$ ,  $SD = 81.17$ ). The mean inter-rater agreement prior to reconciliation was  $\kappa = .81$ .

## Results and Discussion

We calculated the percentage that each of the 18 codes was represented within each country and within the entire sample of focus groups. Five codes were never discussed. Another five codes accounted for less than 6% of the discussion, so our reporting specifically focuses on the eight most frequently occurring codes (see Figure 1).

The most prevalent metaperception was that refugees felt the host community saw them as threatening the host community in some manner. This belief accounted for 34.12% of the codes. It was the most frequently discussed descriptor in Jordan, Lebanon, and the Netherlands, and the second most frequent in Germany. Table 1 presents a sample of statements coded as metaperceptions of threat. The statements attest to both symbolic and realistic threats.

There was a precipitous drop in the prevalence of all other codes. The second most frequent topic—that refugees should



**Figure 1.** Prevalence of Metaperception Themes Discussed During Focus Group Interviews.

**Table 1.** Sample Statements Coded as Evidence of Meta-Threat.

Statements

When any Syrian commits a mistake here, the Dutch will think that all Syrians are like that. It is not a matter of media or racism. The Dutch think that the Syrians have taken their rights, and for example, they think that the Syrians took the houses that were supposed to be allocated to them. (Anonymous, Netherlands)
Maybe this public opinion [of blaming Syrians for problems] will play a role in making the new generations feel excluded. I can see now that the media puts it all on Syrians when there is a bad thing happening . . . I feel like there is a spotlight focused on Syrians in the media. Why? I do not know. (Anonymous, Germany)
They say that we came and took their men and exploited them. (Anonymous, Lebanon)
Most people say that Syrians are the main cause for their problems. Some accuse us of stealing their water. Others blame us for the lack of job opportunities and others say that we bring the terror with us. (Anonymous, Jordan)
People used to bully me [for being Syrian] . . . When I was engaged, I used to hear lot of bad things from people like “you are wearing a ring” and “you are corrupting other girls’ manners.” (Anonymous, Jordan)
I went to all the Lebanese governorates, and they all say that the Syrians are the reason for the increase in prices. (Anonymous, Lebanon)
There are people who think that we affected their lives, there are people who say “if you [Syrians] hadn’t come, these jobs would be ours.” (Anonymous, Jordan)
Any problem that happens, they say its due to Syrians and they did it. (Anonymous, Jordan)
A journalist asked me about where we pray, and I was surprised by this question. I told him that we can pray everywhere but I understood that there was something implied by that question . . . That we are Arabs and Muslims and they think that those who come from the Middle East threaten their ideologies. (Anonymous, Netherlands)
There was an incident at a cashier of a Lidl supermarket. The customer was my son and the lady at the cashier told him you are living off of our taxes . . . Even our children’s teachers told us Syrians are taking their tax money. (Anonymous, Germany)

leave the country—accounted for only 11.74% of the conversation. The only positive metaperception with a respectable prevalence was a belief that the host community recognized that refugees had a positive impact on society (10.92%). The high prevalence of this belief was due to its high mention in

Germany (30.30%), as it was rarely or never brought up in the remaining three countries. The metaperception that refugees were viewed as low status was the second most frequent metaperception in Jordan and Lebanon but was rarely discussed in Germany or the Netherlands. And finally, the

metaperceptions that refugees were viewed as immoral and dangerous came in as the fourth and fifth ranked belief in every country.

In summary, the most consistently held metaperceptions across all samples were that refugees (a) were a threat to the host community, (b) should leave the country, and are (c) immoral and (d) dangerous. Metaperceptions of threat were more prevalent than the rest. The metaperceptions discussed were overwhelmingly negative. Focus group transcripts were coded for nine positive codes yet only two of those—that host communities see refugees as competent and making a positive impact—were meaningfully discussed. This is consistent with past research finding that metaperceptions, regardless of content, skew negative (Frey & Tropp, 2006; Krueger, 1996; Waytz et al., 2014).

## Study 2

Study 2 used a quantitative approach to test the accuracy and bias of metaperceptions held by Syrian refugees using linear mixed-effect modeling (Lees et al., 2022). Surveys were conducted with both Syrian refugees and members of their host communities. Both groups rated how they felt the host community perceived refugees, allowing us to capture metaperceptions (refugee ratings) and perceptions (host community ratings). The study was conducted after the focus group sessions were completed, and while content analyses were in progress. Thus, the survey measures used in Study 2 only partially reflect insights from Study 1, as the study was conducted before the results of Study 1 were finalized.

Analyses focused on bias and accuracy. Bias captures mean-level differences between the responses of refugees and members of the host community. It is manifest where refugees tend to over or underestimate how negatively they are viewed by the host community. We predicted that refugees' metaperceptions would show bias. Most research in this vein has found that intergroup metaperceptions overestimate how negatively one's group is perceived. This effect is most pronounced when looking at political partisans, as people conjure negative prototypes of the political opposition (Druckman et al., 2022) and in social contexts where there is competition between the two social groups (Lees & Cikara, 2020). It is, however, unclear how these two mechanisms apply to the present context. Although refugees' relationships with their host communities are at times contentious, they are also cooperative. Indeed, elsewhere in our focus groups, Syrian refugees revealed that they viewed most host community members as welcoming and sympathetic and saw those who perceive of and treat them poorly as the minority. Consider the following statement from a refugee interviewed in Germany:

I have a lot of German friends and have had a lot of contacts with Germans. They are extremely good and friendly . . . [They are] very respectful. There could be one or two who are not but

in general they are. There are some bad people who would insult or curse our religion, but this is normal.

This suggests that Syrian refugees perceive little conflict with their host communities and may be likely to conjure a positive prototype when considering these communities. We therefore expected bias but were agnostic about the direction of the expected bias.

Accuracy was examined by probing for a linear relationship between host perceptions and refugee metaperceptions. A significant and positive effect would indicate that refugee metaperceptions accurately reflect host perceptions within the greater population—that is, when host community perceptions about refugees are more negative, refugees' estimates of their host communities should also be more negative. Past research has found a linear effect in conjunction with bias (Lees et al., 2022, see also Lees & Cikara, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

After addressing accuracy and bias, we explored the impact of four additional variables on these metrics. We selected two individual difference variables to test hypotheses derived from past research demonstrating the importance of group salience and evaluative concern in the activation of intergroup metaperceptions. To examine the importance of group salience, we measured the degree to which refugee participants identified as Syrian. According to past research, we would expect that the greater one's Syrian identity, the more negative their metaperceptions. To approximate evaluative concern, we measured whether refugee participants experienced anxiety about interacting with members of the host community, as this construct was conceptualized as involving evaluative anxiety (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). We predicted that higher anxiety would indicate greater evaluative concern, leading to greater activation of negative meta-stereotypes (Vorauer et al., 2000) and increasing overestimation of negativity.

To test their relation to accuracy, we examined whether each of these variables moderated the linear relationship between host community perceptions and refugee metaperceptions. The nature of these interactions, however, was dependent on the presence and direction of biasing. If participants overestimated how negatively they were perceived, then evaluative concern and group salience should exacerbate this effect, leading to lesser accuracy and greater negative biasing. On the contrary, if participants underestimated their negativity, these two factors would be expected to increase accuracy, as they would likely counter the positivity bias.

The remaining two variables we tested were country and perception domain. Given the numerous differences between countries discussed previously that likely influence the dynamic between refugees and their hosts, we examined whether accuracy differed as a function of country. The domain analyses tested whether accuracy differed based on the metaperception that was measured, for instance, if

**Table 2.** Demographics of Each Sample in Study 2.

Variable	Refugees				
	Total	Lebanon	Jordan	Germany	The Netherlands
Sample size	1,360	325	350	284	401
Sex (% female)	44.0	46.8	55.4	39.4	35.2
Age M (SD)	33.29 (10.79)	32.26 (10.47)	35.33 (13.30)	33.33 (9.75)	32.32 (8.91)
SES M (SD)	4.30 (2.33)	3.57 (2.11)	2.73 (1.85)	4.79 (1.84)	5.91 (2.03)
Employment (% employed)	31.6	37.5	9.4	32.7	45.4
Variable	Host community				
	Total	Lebanon	Jordan	Germany	The Netherlands
Sample size	1,441	312	300	418	410
Sex (% female)	48.5	49.4	42.7	49.6	51.0
Age M (SD)	44.60 (16.15)	35.86 (13.63)	38.07 (14.49)	51.65 (13.90)	48.83 (16.36)
SES M (SD)	5.55 (2.15)	4.79 (2.21)	4.67 (2.50)	5.79 (1.75)	6.53 (1.69)
Employment (% employed)	57.0	56.7	54.0	60.4	56.1

Note. SES = socioeconomic status.

metaperceptions of refugees as threatening were more or less accurate than metaperceptions of refugees as incompetent. We had no a priori predictions.

## Method

**Participants.** Surveys were conducted with 1,360 Syrian refugees and 1,441 host community members residing in the Netherlands, Germany, Jordan, and Lebanon. Participation occurred in 2020. In Jordan and Lebanon, participation involved face-to-face interviews. Host community participants were recruited using a multi-stage probability-based sample using the population census. Potential Syrian refugee participants were identified based on information provided by local organizations that work with refugees. In the Netherlands, data collection occurred online. Host community participants were recruited via a research panel intended to gather a representative sample of the Dutch population. Refugee participants were a mixture of those recruited for a refugee survey panel hosted by a local research agency, and refugees recruited via advertisements on social media. In Germany, the host community was sampled through an online research panel, and the refugee sample was recruited via face-to-face interviews. For the online samples, data from participants who did not complete the survey or who failed attention check questions were excluded from

analyses: refugees in the Netherlands (101 participants), Dutch (46 participants), and Germany (39 participants).

The data analyzed were the first phase of a longitudinal assessment (with a second measurement occurring a year later). We aimed for 200 to 250 participants per country at the second survey wave, which is not part of this report. Samples collected at this first wave accounted for anticipated attrition. We recruited the largest samples that we could afford, given resource constraints. Researchers did not examine the data until all responses were collected.

Demographic information was collected for age, sex (male/female), socioeconomic status, and employment status (employed/unemployed). Participants indicated socioeconomic status using the same measure used in Study 1. Table 2 summarizes the demographics of both samples. Except for the host community samples in Germany and the Netherlands, participant ages averaged in the 30s. Sex was equally divided—44% and 48.5% women in the refugee and host samples—although refugee samples in Germany and the Netherlands skewed more heavily male. Refugees reported lower status and higher unemployment than the host communities. Participants in Germany and the Netherlands reported higher status than those in Jordan and Lebanon.

**Procedure and Materials.** Surveys were translated and back-translated into three languages: Arabic, German, and

Dutch. Participants provided informed consent, either verbally (if participating in-person) or by checking a box that they consent (if participating online). Participants received monetary compensation for their participation.

**(Meta)perceptions.** Participants indicated their (meta) perceptions about refugees on six domains. Using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *completely*), participants rated the extent to which they thought the host community perceived Syrian refugees as competent (measured as *capable* and *competent*;  $r_s = .51-.84$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ), sociable (measured as *friendly* and *warm*;  $r_s = .67-.84$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ), moral (measured as *sincere* and *trustworthy*;  $r_s = .52-.86$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ), dangerous (measured as *aggressive* and *dangerous*;  $r_s = .64-.87$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ), and unclean (measured with ratings of *unsanitary* and *impure*;  $r_s = .47-.93$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ). Also using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*), participants rated threat level using a revised version of two items ( $r_s = .38-.77$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ) originally designed as part of the Perceived Islamophobia Scale (Kunst et al., 2013). The items read as: *A lot of [host country people] are afraid that refugees are going to take over [host country]*; *A lot of [host country people] consider refugees a threat to [host country] culture*.

The competence, sociability, and morality items were reverse-coded such that higher values represented perceptions of refugees as incompetent, antisocial, and immoral, respectively. As a result, all (meta)perception scores were such that higher values represented more negative perceptions about refugees. Refugees' ratings represented metaperceptions (i.e., how refugees felt the host community characterized refugees). Host community ratings captured host community perceptions about refugees. We included the host perception data to test the accuracy of refugees' metaperceptions. To include them in the linear mixed-effect model, we calculated group means within each country for each of the six perception domains separately.

**Syrian Identity Strength.** Refugee participants completed three items ( $\alpha_s = .63-.78$ ) measuring the strength of their social identity as Syrians. The items were as follows: *I identify strongly with Syrians*; *My Syrian identity is an important part of who I am*; and *I feel a strong sense of solidarity with other Syrians*. These and all subsequent items were completed on the same 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Intergroup Interaction Anxiety.** Refugee participants completed two items ( $r_s = .49-.65$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ) similar to those used in past research (e.g., Stephan & Stephan, 1985): *I would be anxious interacting socially with [host country people]*; *I think [host country people] would be uncomfortable interacting with me socially*.

## Results

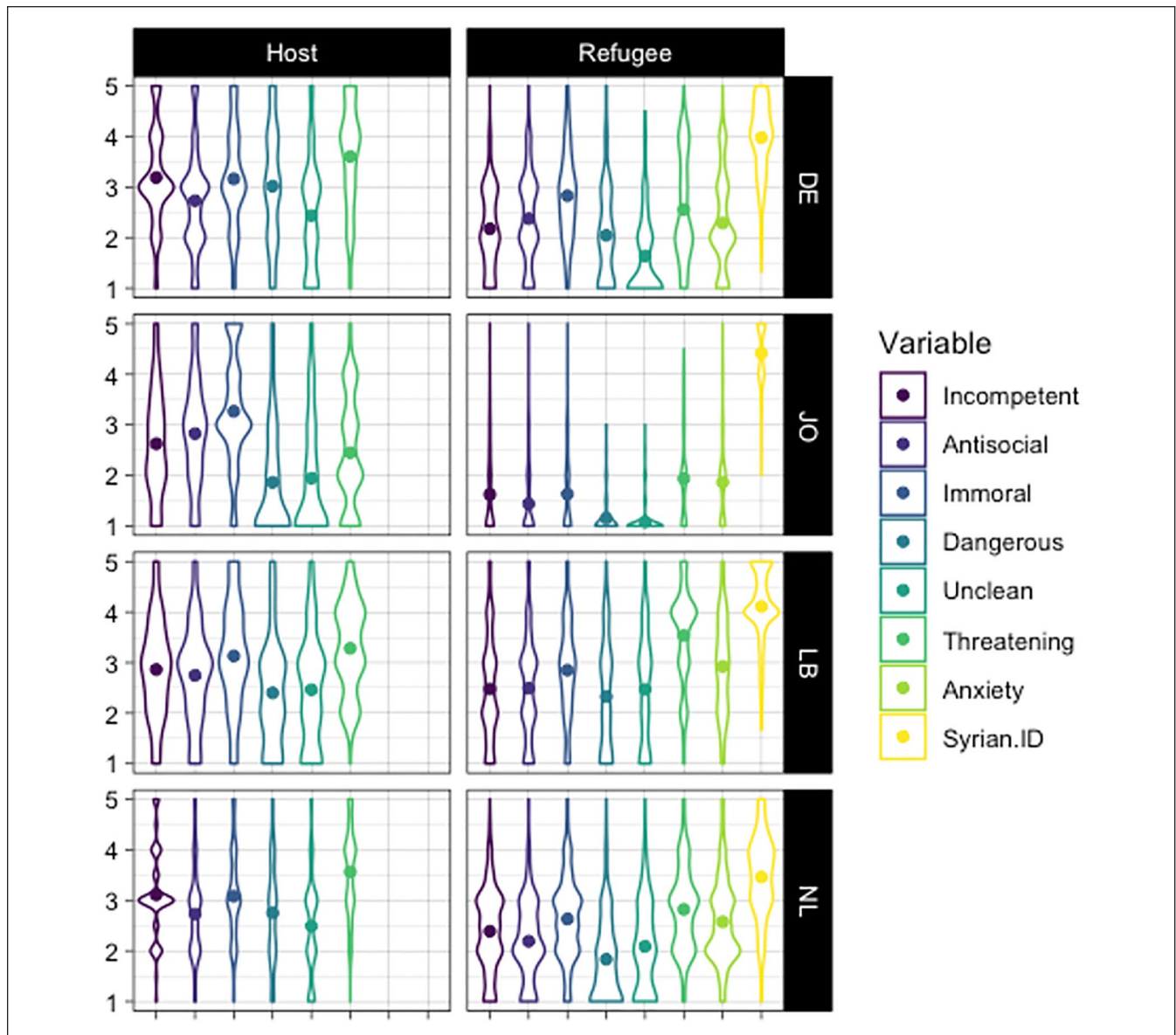
Means and distributions of all variables are depicted in Figure 2. Correlations are in the Supplemental Materials. We examined accuracy with a series of five linear mixed-effect models. Analyses were conducted using R (R Core Team, 2022) and the lme4 (Bates et al., 2015) package. *P*-values were calculated using the Satterthwaite approximation in the lmerTest package (Kuznetsova et al., 2017). Figures were produced with ggplot2 (Wickham, 2016) and sjPlot (Lüdtke, 2022). Simple slopes, estimated marginal means, and their contrasts were calculated using the emmeans package (Lenth, 2023). We modeled our approach after that employed by Lees & Cikara (2021), Lees et al. (2022).

**Model 1: Baseline Accuracy and Directional Bias.** Model 1 examined accuracy (i.e., how closely refugees' metaperceptions tracked host members' perceptions) and directional bias (i.e., the absolute gap between the perceptions and metaperceptions). We regressed the dependent variable of refugee metaperceptions onto the independent variable of host perceptions. We included one random intercept for country (LB, JO, DE, and NL) and one for subjects nested within country.<sup>2</sup> Accuracy was evidenced by the presence of a significant positive slope between host perceptions and refugee metaperceptions. Bias was evidenced by a significant intercept value.

We centered the dependent variable (refugee metaperceptions) and the independent variable (host perceptions) on the host community perception country means. In each country, we calculated the mean host community perception across domains. We then subtracted this mean from the dependent variable and independent variable. This changed the interpretation of the model intercept, such that a value of "0" indicated that metaperceptions did not differ from the average perception of the host community within their country. (Meta)perceptions were coded with higher values indicating greater negativity. A positive intercept thus represented overestimation of negativity, and a negative intercept captured underestimation of negativity.

The effect of host perceptions on refugee metaperceptions was positive and significant ( $b = .65$ , 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.60, 0.69],  $p < .001$ ), indicating that when host community perceptions about refugees were more negative, refugees' metaperceptions of how they were perceived were likewise more negative. The intercept, which indicates a difference between host members' perceptions and metaperceptions, was significant with a value of  $-0.63$  (95% CI = [-1.23, -0.03],  $p = .044$ ). This meant that, on average, refugees underestimated how negatively they were perceived by their host communities. Thus, the findings indicate that metaperceptions are not only relatively accurate but also positively biased. In other words, refugees underestimated how negatively they are perceived by their hosts.

**Models 2–5: Moderation of Accuracy and Bias.** The remaining models tested the influence of four variables on accuracy and



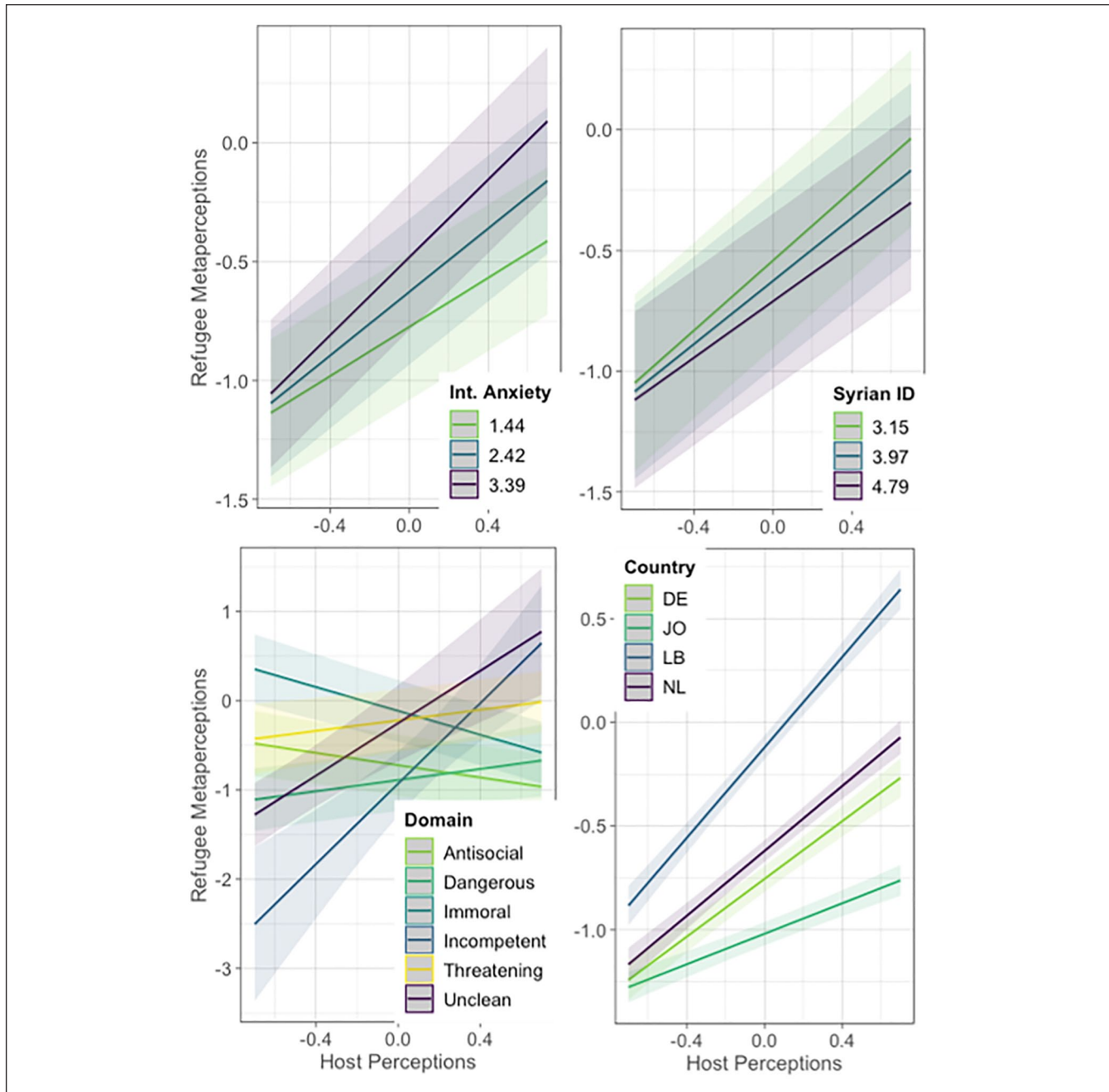
**Figure 2.** Means and Distributions of Untransformed Variables Included in Models.

bias: interaction anxiety (Model 2), Syrian identity strength (Model 3), metaperception domain (Model 4), and country (Model 5). Models 2 to 4 contained the same fixed effect and random intercepts as Model 1. Model 5 included country as a fixed effect, not as a random intercept. Each model had additional terms to capture the main effect and interaction of the newly added variable with host community perceptions. Interactions are visualized in Figure 3.

Models 2 and 3 (see Table 3) included continuous variables, so we examined bias by contrasting the mean intercept values for the tested variables to the intercept values at +1 SD. We examined accuracy by contrasting the mean slopes for the tested variables to the slopes at +1 SD. Significant contrasts indicated that the variables had significant impacts

on bias and accuracy, respectively. We also tested the simple slopes at the mean, +1 SD, and -1 SD.

Model 2 revealed a significant Host Perception × Interaction Anxiety interaction ( $b = .15$ , 95% CI = [0.11, 0.20],  $p < .001$ ), but simple slopes analyses revealed that host community perceptions were positively and significantly related to refugee metaperceptions regardless of anxiety level (i.e., all slopes were significant at  $p < .001$ ). Thus, metaperceptions were accurate regardless of anxiety. However, the slope for participants high in anxiety (+1 SD) was significantly steeper than the slope for those with mean anxiety ( $p < .001$ ), demonstrating that metaperceptions of refugees high in anxiety tracked the perceptions of host members better. The intercept values were negative for all



**Figure 3.** Moderation of Linear Relationship Between Host Community Perceptions and Refugee Perceptions.

anxiety levels, indicating positive bias regardless of anxiety. However, the intercept for those high in anxiety was significantly greater than for those with mean anxiety ( $p < .001$ ), demonstrating lesser positive bias among those high in anxiety.

Model 3 revealed a significant Host Perception  $\times$  Syrian Identity interaction ( $b = -.09$ , 95% CI =  $[-0.14, -0.03]$ ,  $p = .002$ ), but simple slopes analyses revealed that host community perceptions were positively and significantly related to refugee metaperceptions regardless of identity strength

(i.e., all slopes were significant at  $p < .001$ ). Metaperceptions were thus accurate regardless of identity strength. However, the slope for participants high in Syrian identity (+1 SD) was significantly flatter than the slope for those with mean identity strength ( $p = .006$ ). This indicates that metaperceptions of refugees highly identified as Syrian tracked the perceptions of host members worse than those less identified. The intercept values were negative for all identity levels, indicating positive bias. The intercept value for those high in Syrian identity was likewise significantly smaller than the

**Table 3.** Results of Models 1–3.

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>b</i>	CI	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	CI	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	CI	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	-.63	[-1.23, -0.03]	.044	-.63	[-1.13, -0.13]	.028	-.63	[-1.21, -0.04]	.043
Host perceptions	.65	[0.60, 0.69]	<.001	.67	[0.62, 0.71]	<.001	.65	[0.61, 0.70]	<.001
Interaction anxiety				.15	[0.12, 0.18]	<.001			
Host × Anxiety				.15	[0.11, 0.20]	<.001			
Syria identity							-.10	[-0.14, -0.06]	<.001
Host × Identity							-.09	[-0.14, -0.03]	.002
<b>Random effects</b>									
$\sigma^2$		.62			.62			.62	
$\tau_{00}$ Country:Subject		.19			.17			.18	
$\tau_{00}$ Country		.14			.10			.14	
ICC		.34			.30			.34	
$N_{\text{Country}}$		4			4			4	
$N_{\text{Subj}}$		1,360			1,360			1,358	
Observations		8,160			8,160			8,148	
Marg. $R^2$ /Cond. $R^2$		.063/.386			.091/.365			.071/.384	

Note. CI = confidence interval; ICC = intraclass correlation coefficient.

value for those with mean identification ( $p < .001$ ). This indicates that individuals highly identified as Syrian expressed greater positivity in their metaperception of host community attitudes toward refugees.

Models 4 and 5 had categorical variables (i.e., metaperception domain, country) that were entered into the models as a series of effect codes. Significant main effects at each level of the variable indicated that the mean metaperception value for that level differed significantly from the grand mean (the intercept). This tested moderation of bias. Significant interaction coefficients at each level of the variables indicated that the slope for that level differed significantly from the grand mean of the slopes (the main effect of host perceptions). This tested moderation of accuracy. We also tested the simple slopes at each level of the categorical variables. Full presentation of these results is in the Supplemental Materials.

The results of Model 4 found that metaperceptions in every domain were positively biased and underestimated the negativity of host community perceptions. Three of these domains were significantly less biased than the grand mean (immoral,  $p < .001$ ; unclean,  $p = .015$ ; threatening,  $p < .001$ ) and three were significantly more biased (incompetent, antisocial, and dangerous,  $ps < .001$ ). Simple slopes analyses found positive, significant slopes for four of the six domains: incompetent ( $p < .001$ ), unclean ( $p < .001$ ), dangerous ( $p = .004$ ), and threatening ( $p = .001$ ). Thus, metaperceptions were at least somewhat accurate in all four domains. Analyses further revealed that accuracy was significantly greater than the grand mean for metaperceptions of refugees as incompetent and unclean ( $ps < .001$ ). The slopes

were negative and significant for ratings of antisocial and immoral, indicating inaccuracy ( $ps < .001$ ).

Model 5 found that metaperceptions were positively biased everywhere, although they were significantly less biased in Lebanon and more biased in Jordan and Germany ( $ps < .001$ ). Likewise, analyses revealed that metaperceptions in all countries were accurate representations of host perceptions (all slopes were significant at  $p < .001$ ), although refugees in Lebanon were significantly more accurate, and refugees in Jordan were significantly less accurate ( $ps < .001$ ).

## Discussion

The results of Study 2 provided evidence that was in some ways consistent with past literature but also demonstrated significant deviations from it in other ways. First, across models, metaperceptions held by refugees were significantly more positive than perceptions held by their host communities. That is, refugees underestimated how negatively they were perceived by their host communities. Figure 2, which depicts the untransformed means of (meta)perceptions, highlights this pattern and shows that the means for most metaperceptions were around or below the midpoint and refugee metaperceptions generally skewed positive. Although this positivity bias was always present, it was less pronounced for ratings of immoral, unclean, and threatening, and among refugees residing in Lebanon. On the contrary, bias was exacerbated in Jordan and for ratings of incompetence, antisocial, and dangerous. This general pattern of positivity contrasts with past research on political partisans, as well as the

results of Study 1, where metaperceptions skewed negative. We address this in the General Discussion.

Second, analyses on accuracy found that metaperceptions held by refugees were relatively close to host community perceptions meaning that they tracked and represented the differences reported by host members. This was evidenced by a significant positive linear relationship between host perceptions and refugee metaperceptions. Refugees were accurate in all the countries surveyed, although accuracy was higher in Lebanon and lower in Jordan. Moreover, there was evidence that four of the six domains were accurate, with the domains of incompetent and unclean displaying significantly greater accuracy than the other domains. Metaperceptions of refugees as antisocial and immoral were inaccurate. The strong accuracy in the domains of incompetent and unclean was thus likely driving overall accuracy effects and masking the negative slopes for antisocial and immoral.

Although it is difficult to unpack the reasons for the differences that occurred as a function of domain, the pattern of results suggests that refugees were particularly attuned to perceptions of them as unclean. These metaperceptions were significantly less biased and significantly more accurate. It is possible that there is less ambiguity in how these perceptions are expressed by the host community. It is likewise possible that refugees are more sensitive to issues of cleanliness because of the importance of the purity moral foundation in intergroup relations (Haidt, 2012) and fear of rejection by larger society. Accuracy on this domain thus may be more critical to success in society relative to other domains (like morality and sociability), where a positive bias might serve acculturation through esteem needs.

One possible explanation for the country-level difference whereby metaperceptions in Lebanon were less biased and more accurate is that Syrian refugees make up a considerably greater percentage of the population in Lebanon ( $\approx 15\%$ ) than in Jordan ( $\approx 6\%$ ), Germany ( $\approx 1\%$ ), or the Netherlands ( $<.05\%$ ). This higher level of visibility in Lebanon likely means that members of both groups are more likely to have had more intergroup experiences and interactions. This dynamic could create a situation whereby both refugees and host members have access to more evidence about how they are perceived, leading to a more accurate picture of how they are generally perceived by the Lebanese at-large.

In addition, the conditions in Lebanon are likely to promote economic competition between refugees and their host communities (e.g., wages, housing, employment restrictions), which past research has found invokes more negativity (Lees & Cikara, 2020). As the baseline tendency was to underestimate negativity, perceived competition could have increased negativity, thereby reducing the presence of bias in Lebanon.

This particular effect is interesting because the circumstances in Lebanon and Jordan are relatively similar (Housari, 2019; UNHCR, 2022). Yet, refugees in Jordans expressed the least accurate and most positively biased metaperceptions.

Subsequent discussions with refugees, the host community, and those who work in the refugee aid domain suggest that Jordanians place the blame for failing to deal effectively with the influx of refugees and the problem this creates squarely on the government while the Lebanese appear to be more likely to scapegoat refugees for their circumstances. Jordanians harbor resentment toward refugees for taking lower wages and limiting jobs available to Jordanians, but blame a lack of government oversight more than the refugees. In addition, we would be remiss to not acknowledge the important history between Syria and Lebanon that strained relations between the countries prior to the Syrian Civil War. These factors likely impact perceived competition in Lebanon between the refugees and their host communities.

In addition to the findings on domain and country, we found that interaction anxiety was associated with greater accuracy and lesser positive biasing. This is consistent with the hypothesis that individuals high in interaction anxiety (as a proxy of evaluative concern) would think that outgroup members perceive of them more negatively. However, because the current cross-sectional design cannot test causality in this manner, it is likewise possible that when people think they are perceived in a negative manner by outgroup members, they are anxious about interacting with those outgroup members. Both are consistent with our findings and illuminate the important role that interaction anxiety has in intergroup relations.

Finally, we found that Syrian identity was associated with lesser accuracy and greater positive biasing. This is inconsistent with our hypothesis based in past metaperception research, which suggested that greater salience of one's Syrian identity would lead to more negative metaperceptions. A likely explanation for this effect is that a strong Syrian identity invokes two simultaneous processes. The first is that which is discussed in the metaperception literature wherein higher identification with a group represents higher salience of the group, which makes people more sensitive to negative outgroup reactions. The second is that higher identification with a group is a proxy for group-esteem motivations (e.g., Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In this latter case, higher identification would bias metaperceptions in a positive direction as individuals wish to see their group valued positively as they derive esteem from group membership. Our finding is more consistent with this latter process.

## General Discussion

Nearly 7 million Syrian refugees were displaced to 130+ countries, each presenting unique resettlement experiences due to varying cultural, geographic, historical, demographic, and legal contexts. To illuminate possible universals of the refugee experience, and to account for this country-level variability, we sampled Syrian refugees living in four countries that have resettled in large numbers: Lebanon, Jordan, Germany, and the Netherlands. The goal was to examine

refugees' metaperceptions, with specific interest in their content and accuracy.

In Study 1, we coded the themes that arose naturally and unprompted when refugees reflected on how they were perceived by members of their host communities. Replicating past findings (e.g., Krueger, 1996; Vorauer et al., 1998; Waytz et al., 2014), refugees thought their host communities perceived them using more negative than positive descriptors. One construct dominated refugees' psyche, accounting for more than one third of coded perceptions—that refugees were seen as threatening. This is revealing, as threat has been extensively studied in intergroup relations, but mostly unstudied as an intergroup metaperception (except see Obaidi et al., 2018).

Study 2 used quantitative methods to assess whether refugees accurately estimated the perceptions of their host communities. We found that refugees were overall accurate in their metaperceptions—that is, refugee metaperceptions were more likely to be negative when host perceptions were more negative. At the same time, refugees were also overall positively biased and underestimated how negatively they were perceived by their host communities. Analyses examining the effect of various moderating variables found lower bias and higher accuracy among refugees living in Lebanon, refugees high in interaction anxiety, and refugees low in Syrian identity. Although accuracy and bias differed significantly as a function of domain, four of the six metaperception domains were at least somewhat accurate reflections of host community perceptions.

Whereas Study 1 found that the discussion of metaperceptions skewed negative, mean levels of the untransformed metaperception variables in Study 2 skewed positive. This could be an artifact of the different methods used to assess metaperceptions in the two studies. It is possible that negativity inspired greater discussion among focus group participants in Study 1 and/or required greater "unpacking" by discussion moderators, inflating its presence. Positivity, on the contrary, may have been conveyed simply without inspiring discussion. Our decision to focus on a handful of non-specific traits that represented universals of person perception also diverged from how metaperceptions and their accuracy have been tested in past work. For instance, Vorauer et al. (1998) restricted meta-stereotypes to only those traits that were descriptive of one, not both, groups. Lees and Cikara (2020), on the contrary, tested accuracy of metaperceptions about group behaviors, not group traits. This suggests that accuracy and bias may differ systematically as a function of the metaperception domains that are measured. Indeed, we found significant variability within the handful of traits we measured in Study 2. We also measured host perceptions by asking participants how they felt the host community perceived refugees, not how they personally perceived them. It is thus possible that host community participants were inaccurate at estimating the views of the entire community, rather than refugees being inaccurate.

This research examined metaperceptions and their accuracy within a different context and among a different population than has been studied in past research. Whereas we conducted field research within the real-world context of Syrian refugees and their relations with their hosting communities, other work has studied intergroup metaperceptions via hypothetical scenarios that offer greater experimental control and within contexts specific to ethnic and political conflicts in Western countries. It is possible that accuracy and bias of metaperceptions is variable across contexts. Some of this past work has suggested that competition invokes an overestimation of negativity (Lees & Cikara, 2020). As discussed before, focus group conversations suggested that Syrian refugees held overwhelmingly positive views of their host communities as welcoming, sympathetic, and cooperative. Future research may wish to test this conjecture directly. For instance, we imagine that priming refugee participants with competition between refugees and host communities could flip the results. As we discussed previously, it is possible that we found lesser bias in Lebanon because the specific circumstances there have induced greater intergroup competition than in the other countries.

It is also important to note several limitations of this work. The research procedures varied somewhat across countries, as certain methods were not feasible in all locations. It is possible that responses could have varied as a function of survey modality, but since modality was conflated with country, it is impossible to determine. The countries studied were selected because they were locations with large numbers of resettled Syrian refugees that we could access. The specifics of each country varied considerably across cultural, geographic, historical, demographic, legal, and other contexts, but the countries were not selected because they varied systematically on any of these dimensions. Thus, we can only conjecture as to why, for instance, refugees in Lebanon were more accurate than those in Jordan. If this work were replicated with Syrian refugees in numerous other countries selected to vary on specific criteria, we may be better able to isolate possible macro-level causes of accuracy differences in metaperceptions, but four countries are insufficient for such an analysis.

Social psychological research has long demonstrated that perceptions of threat fuel intergroup conflict. The present research builds on this knowledge to showcase the importance of threat as a metaperception. One possible reason that threat pervades metaperceptions is that narratives deriding refugees as threatening are more common in discourse than are discussions of their stereotypic (competence and warmth) traits. Most members of the host populations have had little say in admitting refugees into their midst. The notion that large numbers of refugees were suddenly foisted upon them, can often engender a negative attitude toward newcomers that introduces uncertainty and strangeness into their worlds. This can invite messaging in the formal and informal media that portrays refugees as "others" who are inferior to their

host communities. These messages include overt derision of Muslim immigrants and refugees as invaders or terrorists, but also subtle uses of language that discuss refugees as arriving in swarms or waves (cf. Turton, 2003).<sup>3</sup> As the world is mired in a refugee crisis from Ukraine, we should be cognizant of the damage these messages can have on refugees as they attempt to remake their lives in unfamiliar homes. Ukrainian refugees have, thus far, been welcomed with open arms, perhaps because their neighboring European countries do not (yet) see them as others who threaten their livelihood or culture. Be it as it may, our research suggests that the absence of threat narratives bodes well for their resettlement.

This research also highlights the importance of studying hard-to-reach, understudied populations, as well as making room for qualitative research in social psychological endeavors. Had we avoided a qualitative approach in favor of traditional quantitative approaches we may have never realized the primacy of threat in refugees' metaperceptions. Our accuracy findings diverge somewhat from past research, but they also provide the first test of metaperception accuracy in this specific intergroup context. We hope future research will look to other intergroup contexts and the features of those contexts to better isolate the circumstances under which metaperceptions should be accurate or skewed in positive or negative directions.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available online with this article.

### Notes

1. The accuracy analyses were exploratory. They were suggested by a reviewer. The specific hypotheses were derived during the review process, as the new analysis strategy provided

opportunities that were not apparent prior to the review. In some cases, the predicted relationships would be better tested with different measures. The measures selected were the best proxies in our data.

- Given the small number of countries under study, we recognize the limitations of including country as a random intercept. We repeated Models 1-4 with country as a fixed effect instead of a random intercept. This did not change the pattern of results.
- Experimental studies directly testing the link between these uses of language and (meta)perceptions of threat would provide direct insight into the power of media narratives on refugees' well-being (see Marshall & Shapiro, 2018). We thank a reviewer for proposing this idea. Interventions to improve refugee-host community relations may consider these issues.

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