

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# After Coming In, Settling In: An Analysis of Early-Stage Acculturation Preferences of Male Syrian and Iraqi Asylum Seekers in Belgium

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Despite the current societal emergency, little is known about the acculturation processes undergone by Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers. The present paper investigates their early-stage acculturation preferences in relation to their perception of majority members' acculturation expectations and to their settlement intentions. 103 Syrian and Iraqi male asylum seekers were recruited during the peak of the 2015 "refugee crisis" in a provisional reception centre and completed a brief questionnaire. Results showed that asylum seekers reported a high willingness to participate in the host society and to adopt the host culture, while maintaining their culture of origin. Moreover, as predicted, asylum seekers' settlement intentions and their perceptions of majority members' acculturation expectations were key predictors of their own acculturation preferences. Implications for integration policies are discussed.

**Keywords:** Asylum seekers; Refugees; Migrant crisis; Acculturation; Settlement intentions

In an interview given on September 30th, 2015, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon (2015) stated: "We face the biggest refugee and migration crisis since World War II." In this flow, the Syrian Crisis has played a major role in 2015. According to UNHCR (2015), the global number of Syrian refugees at mid 2015 was estimated at 4.2 million and more than 800,000 Syrian asylum applications were recorded by European countries between April 2011 and November 2015. In addition to these Syrian asylum seekers, Iraqis have also migrated in number during 2015 due to the instability in the Middle East (Eurostat, 2015). In Belgium, the Immigration Office registered 35,476 asylum applications, which represents an increase of 106.1% compared to 2014 (CGRA, 2016a). Iraq and Syria were the two most represented nationalities; i.e. 21.8% of them came from Iraq and 21.3% from Syria (CGRA, 2016a). Even if the number of Syrian and asylum seekers has decreased in comparison with 2015, on average, more than three hundred Syrians and Iraqis per month applied for asylum in Belgium during 2016 (CGRA, 2016b). Beyond the logistic issues raised by their arrival, the integration of these asylum seekers within the host societies represents an important challenge for European countries.

However, so far, despite the societal emergency, little is known regarding the acculturation preferences of Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers as well as about the possible determinants of these preferences. Indeed, research on psychological acculturation has mostly investigated

historically settled minorities such as Turkish or North African Muslim immigrants in Western Europe (e.g. Maliepaard, Lubbers & Gijsberts, 2010). Moreover, the particularly challenging situation of asylum seekers has also been understudied. The aim of this article is to provide a socio-psychological perspective on Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers' integration processes by highlighting their acculturation preferences and potential determinants of these preferences at an early stage of their settlement in the host country. Because they constitute a large majority of this cohort of asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2015), we will focus on male Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers. The study was carried out during the peak of the 2015 "migrant crisis".

## Early-stage acculturative preferences

Acculturation has been defined as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). Research on acculturation converge toward conceptualizations with two independent dimensions (e.g. Berry, 1997; Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault & Senécal, 1997). The first is based on the maintenance of the culture of origin and refers to the preservation of the cultural heritage. The second is related to the culture of the host country and was conceptualized by two dominant models which focus either on the participation of immigrants in the host society (Berry, 1997) or on the adoption of the host culture (Bourhis et al., 1997). Asylum seekers who

recently arrived in the host country are not (yet) settled and have had only few contacts with majority members in the host country. In that respect, the acculturation preferences endorsed by these asylum seekers are germane to what Berry and Sam (1997) named “pre-acculturation orientation”. Pre-acculturation “refers to the changes experienced by a potential migrant after making the decision to emigrate, having contact (indirectly or directly) with the society of immigration, and starting preparations for the upcoming migration” (Jasinskaja-Lahti & Yijälä, 2011). While immigrants’ acculturation orientations were typically seen as the results of immigrants’ contact with majority members in the host country, recent research has shown that immigrants leave their country with pre-acculturation attitudes (Tartakovsky, 2002, 2007; Yijälä & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2010). Moreover, these attitudes partly determine post-migration adaptation (Tartakovsky, 2007), and could therefore be considered as a first stage of the acculturation process. However, because pre-acculturation preferences are theoretically applicable only to potential migrants, we would rather define the asylum seekers’ acculturation preferences as early-stage acculturation preferences. The early-stage acculturation refers to the in-between situation when the immigrant has just arrived in the host country but has not (yet) settled. Due to a lack of research on immigrants recently arrived in the host country, our understanding of these early-stage acculturation preferences is limited. However, numerous empirical studies among many different minorities in several countries have shown that integration (i.e. maintenance of the origin culture and adoption of the host culture or participation in the host society) is the most commonly endorsed acculturation strategy by minority members (e.g. Sam & Berry, 2006). In a pre-migration context, Yijälä and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2010) also found that potential migrants from Russia to Finland also commonly endorse an integration strategy. Based on these results, we could expect that male Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers should also intend to adopt the host culture, participate in the host society, and maintain their origin culture.

The present paper aims to examine how some specificities of the social context surrounding the asylum seekers’ arrival and some inherent characteristics of their situation are likely to shape their acculturation preferences. First, the asylum seekers’ migratory experience is predominantly determined by external forces, which led them to flee their homeland. This raises the issue of the intended length of their settlement in the host country. As Alberts and Hazen (2005) stated, it is important to consider that people migrate with different expectations regarding the length of their settlement and that immigrants may also change their mind after migration. Recent research has shown that most migrations can be seen as temporary (Bijwaard, 2010; Dustmann & Weiss, 2007). Depending on the host country and on the period of time, from 20% to 50% of immigrants leave their host country to move either to their origin or to a third country within five years after their arrival (Dumont & Spielvogel, 2008). Moreover, this issue is all the more important in the European context that European countries are less successful than

other countries, such as Canada or the United States, in retaining immigrants (Dumont & Spielvogel, 2008). In line with recent research trends (e.g. Geurts & Lubbers, 2016), the present study raises the question of how the intended length of settlement influences asylum seekers’ attitudes and, more precisely, their early-stage acculturative preferences.

Secondly, insofar as the asylum seekers’ arrival has provoked intense debates in the European public space (Bunyan, 2015), perception of the majority members’ expectations appears to be a particularly important factor. Moreover, by definition, asylum seekers are waiting for the approval of their refugee status in the host country and are therefore involved in new intergroup relations with majority members of this society. This challenging situation should lead asylum seekers to be particularly sensitive to majority members’ expectations. We will now address these two points and examine their potential influence on asylum seekers’ acculturation preferences.

### Long-term settlement intentions

The integration of asylum seekers raises the question of the interplay between settlement intentions and acculturation preferences. Even though willingness to settle for a long time in the host country is an important issue for immigrants in general (De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2014), this is particularly true for asylum seekers who, *a priori*, did not choose to migrate as they were forced to flee their country and settle in another one. Most existing studies examined the influence of the level of actual integration in the host country on the willingness to return to the country of origin (Dustmann & Weiss, 2007; Jensen & Pedersen, 2007). The majority of those studies found a negative correlation between these variables, although others showed that being well integrated provides immigrants with more resources, which helps them maintain regular contact with their country of origin, which therefore increases the probability of their return (Bijwaard, 2010; De Haas & Fokkema, 2011). However, by definition, asylum seekers have not (yet) settled in the host country. In these conditions, we rather envision the reverse trend: Settlement intentions should affect asylum seekers’ acculturation preferences.

According to Carling and Pettersen (2014), migrants’ intentions to settle in the host country for a long period should lead them to expend much effort to adapt. Geurts and Lubbers (2016) provided evidence that migrants who intended to stay only temporarily in Netherlands showed less improvement in adaptation and in Dutch language skills than those who intended to settle permanently. Moreover, they found that changing a temporary intention into a permanent one also strongly improved the command in the second language.

In line with these results, we expect that asylum seekers’ acculturation preferences on the adoption and participation dimensions will vary as a function of their intentions to settle in the host country. The more asylum seekers will intend to settle for a long time, the more they will be in favour of adopting the host culture and of participating in the host society.

Because integration, as conceptualized by Berry (1997) as well as by Bourhis et al. (1997), is also based on the immigrants' maintenance of their culture of origin, it is important to consider the possible influence of asylum seekers' settlement intentions on this dimension of acculturation. Although little is known regarding this effect, a large array of studies based on social capital theories have questioned the impact of immigrants' maintenance of social bonds with their origin community on actual integration in the host country (e.g. Navarra, Niehof & van der Vaart, 2013). This literature has shown that possessing this type of social network provides useful resources generating employment opportunities to migrants and satisfying their special needs and preferences (Bertrand, 2000; Bun & Christie, 1995; Lamba & Krahn, 2003). We could therefore expect settlement intentions to be associated with willingness to maintain their origin culture insofar as this cultural maintenance may facilitate the immigrants' settlement.

To sum up, we suggest that settlement intentions play an important role in the asylum seekers' acculturation preferences. Indeed, we expect to observe a positive correlation between these intentions and the adoption of the host culture, participation in the host society, as well as the maintenance of the origin culture.

### **Perception of national majority members' expectations**

Because asylum seekers are embedded in new intergroup relations with the host society and the acquisition of the refugee status depends on a decision made by state institutions representing the majority group, we expect them to be particularly sensitive to national majority members' expectations. This idea was supported by several empirical studies (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Horenczyk & Schmitz, 2003; Phillimore, 2011; Zagefka, Gonzales & Brown, 2011). For example, Phillimore (2011) showed, through interviews with refugees from various countries, that perceptions of majority members' attitudes toward them affected their desire to participate in the host society. This author argued that the negative headlines in the media vilifying asylum seekers and reporting their criminal behaviours reduce their confidence and lead them to endorse either separation or marginalization strategies. Perceived majority members' attitudes were also found to influence non-refugee immigrants' attitudes (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003; Zagefka et al., 2011) and pre-acculturation orientations (Yijälä & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2010). Indeed, research showed that minority members' perceptions of majority members' acculturation expectations shape minority members' preferences (Zagefka et al., 2011): Minority members' preferences for participation were positively associated with their perception that majority members expected participation. The same effect was found for cultural maintenance preferences. We therefore expect a positive correlation between asylum seekers' perception of majority members' acculturation expectations regarding cultural maintenance, adoption of the host culture, and participation in the host society and their preferences in the corresponding dimension.

These effects of both settlement intentions and perceived majority members' expectations on early-stage acculturation preferences should be significant beyond the influence of background variables identified as possible sources of influence on acculturation orientations, such as age, nationality or religiosity (Berry & Sam, 1997).

### **Hypotheses**

The first aim of the present study is to investigate the early-stage acculturation preferences of male Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers recently arrived in Belgium. We expect that, on average, they will self-report a high willingness to adopt the host culture and participate in the host society, but also to maintain their origin culture.

Regarding the possible determinants of these early-stage acculturation preferences, we highlight two different variables: perception of majority members' acculturation expectations and settlement intention. First, we expect a positive correlation between asylum seekers' acculturation preferences and their perception of majority members' acculturation expectations regarding cultural maintenance, adoption of the host culture, and participation in the host society. For instance, the more asylum seekers perceive that majority members expect them to adopt the host culture, the more asylum seekers should intend to adopt this culture. Secondly, we also expect to observe a positive correlation between long-term settlement intentions and acculturation preferences regarding cultural maintenance, adoption of the host culture, and participation in the host society. Finally, we expect these variables will have an impact on the acculturation preferences beyond the influence of control variables (i.e. religiosity, age and nationality).

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

One hundred three asylum seekers were recruited from October to December 2015 in both Belgian governmental and Red Cross centres in Belgium, where they were waiting during their asylum application procedure. Seventy-one of them were Iraqis and thirty-two were Syrians. All participants were males, aged from 17 to 50 ( $M = 28.30$ ,  $SD = 7.38$ ). Participants were on the Belgian soil for 1 to 180 days ( $M = 48.90$ ,  $SD = 33.82$ ). Participants were generally well educated with 36% having a university degree, 26% a high school degree, 34% the equivalent of a junior high school degree and 4% an elementary school level. The most common religious affiliation was Muslim (94%); the other participants claimed no religion.

The questionnaire was translated from English into Arabic by one of the co-authors of the paper, who is a native Syrian. The translation was subsequently checked by two people coming from Syria and Iraq. They checked for both semantic and conceptual equivalence. The items were written in an Arabic language easily understandable by both Iraqis and Syrians. Three interviewers, natives of Middle East countries, recruited the participants by expressing themselves in Syrian or Iraqi Arabic dialects. The questionnaire was presented as addressing the situation of Iraqi and Syrian asylum seekers. It was made clear

that it was absolutely unrelated to their asylum application procedure. Anonymity was also guaranteed and it was made sure that the questionnaire was fully understood by asking participants to provide an oral feedback when they gave back the completed questionnaire.

**Measures**

Except when stated below, all variables were measured on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (Don't agree at all) to 7 (Totally agree).

**Own acculturation preferences.** In line with Ward and Kus (2012), we used single items to measure preferences toward cultural maintenance, participation and cultural adoption: “It is important for me to maintain my own culture in Belgium” (maintenance); “It is important for me to engage in the wider Belgian society” (participation); and “It is important for me to adopt Belgian culture” (adoption). Because asylum seekers were still at the early stage of their acculturation process, and therefore had not had the opportunity to learn cultural habits in the host country, we measured acculturation orientation through their acculturation preferences rather than through self-reported behaviours. This assessment procedure was recommended by Berry (2005).

**Perceived acculturation preferences.** Participants’ perceptions of Belgian majority members’ preferences were assessed by asking the same questions as above, but addressing Belgian majority members’ preferences – e.g. “To what extent do you consider that Belgian people expect refugees to maintain their culture of origin?”.

**Settlement intention.** Single item: “To what extent do you intend to settle in Belgium for a long-term period?”

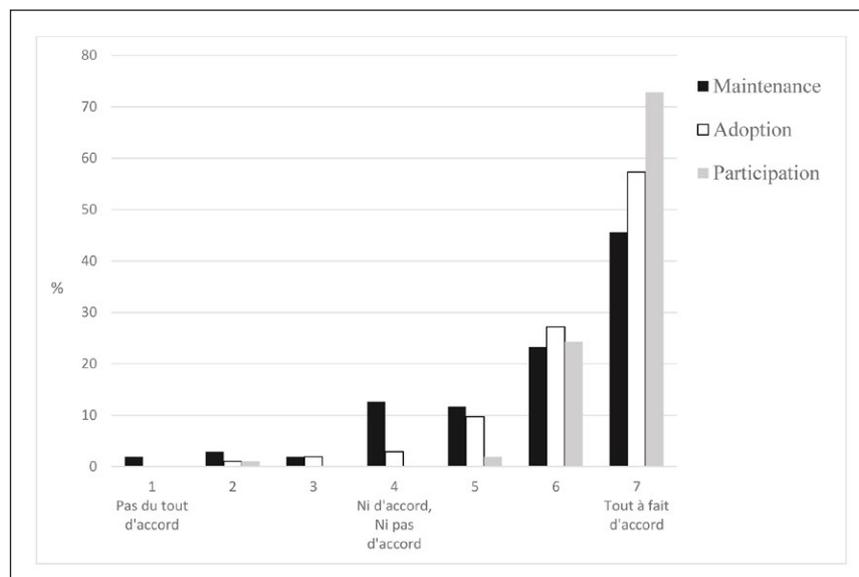
**Religiosity.** We included a measure of religiosity. Religiosity was assessed by two items inspired by Tarakeshwar, Stanton and Pargament (2003): “Is it important for you to devote time to prayer?”, “Is it important for you to live your life according to your religious beliefs?” ( $r = .73$ ).

**Results**

First of all, descriptive analyses showed that participants self-reported a high desire to adopt the host culture ( $M = 6.32$ ;  $SD = 1.01$ ), to participate in the host society ( $M = 6.67$ ;  $SD = 0.68$ ), and to maintain their culture of origin ( $M = 5.81$ ;  $SD = 1.48$ ) (see **Figure 1**). Most of the participants expressed a high willingness to adopt the host culture, participate in the host society, as well as maintain their origin culture. More precisely, 45.6% of them self-reported the highest score of the maintenance scale, 57.3% regarding the adoption scale and 72.8% for the participation scale.

As **Figure 1** shows, these three variables were not normally distributed: adoption – Skewness =  $-1.90$  ( $SE = 0.24$ ); Kurtosis =  $4.01$  ( $SE = 0.47$ ); participation – Skewness =  $-3.73$  ( $SE = 0.24$ ) and Kurtosis of  $21.48$  ( $SE = 0.47$ ); maintenance – Skewness =  $-1.36$  ( $SE = 0.24$ ) and Kurtosis of  $1.41$  ( $SE = 0.47$ ). Therefore, we carried out the non-parametric Friedman’s ANOVA test to check for differences between acculturation preferences on the three dimensions. This test revealed a significant difference between the rank of these three dimensions,  $\chi^2(2) = 23.17$ ,  $p < .001$ . Wilcoxon tests were used to follow up this finding. Bonferroni correction was applied, so that all effects are reported at a .0167 level of significance. These comparisons revealed that willingness to participate in the host society was significantly higher than the desire to adopt the host culture,  $T = 698.50$ ,  $r^1 = -0.25$ , and maintain their culture of origin,  $T = 1894$ ,  $r = -0.33$ . Moreover, willingness to adopt the host culture was also significantly higher than the desire to maintain their culture of origin,  $T = 1719.50$ ,  $r = -0.20$ .

Most participants also expressed a high desire to settle in Belgium for a long period of time ( $M = 6.30$ ;  $SD = 1.18$ ). More precisely, 63.1% of them self-reported the highest score of the scale. This variable’s distribution also had unacceptable Skewness  $-2.20$  ( $SE = 0.47$ ) – and Kurtosis  $-5.12$  ( $SE = 0.24$ ). For this reason, non-parametric tests will be used for testing our hypotheses.



**Figure 1:** Frecency distribution (in percent) of the three dimensions of asylum seekers’ acculturation preferences.

We predicted a positive correlation between perception of majority members' acculturation preferences and asylum seekers' acculturation preferences. As expected, Spearman rank order correlations test showed that perception of majority members' preferences regarding host culture adoption was positively correlated with asylum seekers' adoption preferences (see **Table 1**). We found the same trend on the cultural maintenance and the participation dimensions. Rank order correlations also indicated that both participation and adoption preferences were positively and highly correlated with willingness to settle in the host country.

A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses using a bootstrap method was conducted with each acculturation preference as the criterion variable (see **Table 2**). Control variables – including religiosity, age, and nationality (Syrian or Iraqi) – were entered as predictors in Step 1. Settlement intention and perception of expectations toward asylum seekers' acculturation were entered as predictors in Step 2. The dimension of perceived acculturation expectations was adapted to match the corresponding criterion entered as the dependent variable. For instance, in the regression analysis with adoption preferences as a criterion, we entered perceived majority members' expectations toward host culture adoption.

First of all, as predicted, these analyses showed that perceived majority members' expectations toward asylum seekers' cultural maintenance were positively associated with asylum seekers' preference for cultural maintenance, beyond the impact of the other variables. Religiosity was also a good predictor of this variable: religious participants tended to favour cultural maintenance more than less religious ones. In contrast, perceived majority members' acculturation expectations had no effect on the adoption when control variables and settlement intentions are included. Finally, settlement intentions proved to be a robust positive predictor of adoption and participation, but not of cultural maintenance.

## Discussion

This study investigated antecedents of the early-stage acculturation preferences of Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers during the peak of the 2015 “refugee crisis”. We

emphasized the possible influence of two factors on these preferences insofar as both of them reflect relevant specificities of the asylum seekers' situation in the host country: their settlement intentions and their perception of majority members' acculturation expectations.

Regarding the predictors of acculturation preferences, as we expected and in line with Carling and Pettersen's (2014) theoretical approach, results showed that asylum seekers' intentions to settle long-term were positively associated with their willingness to adopt the host culture and to participate in the host society. As suggested by Carling and Pettersen, one possible interpretation of this result is that asylum seekers who intend to settle in the host country for a long period tend to expend much effort to adapt to the host country. In contrast, no correlation was found between settlement intention and willingness to maintain their culture of origin: this willingness was high regardless of their settlement intentions.

Secondly, as predicted, asylum seekers' perception of majority members' acculturation expectations tended to have a particularly robust effect on their early-stage acculturation preferences on the participation and the maintenance dimensions insofar as it persisted beyond the influence of settlement intentions and of control variables, including religiosity, which was also an important predictor of willingness to maintain their origin culture. This result replicates quantitatively what Phillimore (2011) showed through a qualitative analysis of interviews with refugees and demonstrates, as Yijälä and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2010) highlighted with potential Russian migrants, that early-stage acculturation preferences of Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers recently arrived in Europe are influenced by these perceptions. Even before their arrival in the host country, asylum seekers, and more generally migrants, are often deeply embedded in social networks with people living in their destination country (Massey, 1990; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). These social networks provide information regarding many aspects of life in the destination country and help migrants to anticipate difficulties in their future integration (Massey, 1990). As cultural criteria acquire growing importance in European integration policies (Groenendijk, 2011), these social networks probably relay information on majority members' acculturation

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Adoption preferences	1						
2. Participation preferences	<b>.41**</b>	1					
3. Maintenance preferences	-.09	-.16	1				
4. Perceived adoption expectations	<b>.30**</b>	<b>.26**</b>	.02	1			
5. Perceived participation expectations	.08	<b>.26**</b>	-.03	<b>.55**</b>	1		
6. Perceived maintenance expectations	.01	-.10	<b>.45**</b>	-.14	-.09	1	
7. Settlement intentions	<b>.58**</b>	<b>.39**</b>	-.13	<b>.23*</b>	.11	-.01	1

**Table 1:** Spearman rank order correlations between Acculturation preferences, Perceived majority members' acculturation expectations, and Settlement intentions.

Notes. N = 103, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01.

	<i>b</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>95%C.I.</i>
<b>Adoption</b>			
<b>STEP 1: Control Variables (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.7)</b>			
Religiosity	-0.07	0.04	[-0.16, 0.02]
Age	-0.02	0.02	[-0.06, 0.01]
Nationality <sup>a</sup>	0.14	0.11	[-0.08, 0.36]
<b>STEP 2: Control Variables + Predictors (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.48)</b>			
Religiosity	-0.07	0.04	[-0.15, 0.02]
Age	-0.03	0.01	[-0.06, 0.01]
Nationality <sup>a</sup>	-0.03	0.10	[-0.22, 0.15]
Settlement intentions	0.55	0.11	[0.34, 0.77]
Perceived adoption expectations	0.04	0.07	[-0.08, 0.18]
<b>Participation</b>			
<b>STEP 1: Control Variables (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.7)</b>			
Religiosity	-0.05	0.03	[-0.11, 0.01]
Age	0.00	0.01	[-0.01, 0.01]
Nationality <sup>a</sup>	0.15	0.09	[0.00, 0.34]
<b>STEP 2: Control Variables + Predictors (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.21)</b>			
Religiosity	-0.05	0.03	[-0.11, 0.01]
Age	0.00	0.01	[-0.02, 0.01]
Nationality <sup>a</sup>	0.09	0.7	[-0.06, 0.24]
Settlement intentions	0.20	0.09	[0.02, 0.41]
Perceived participation expectations	0.11	0.07	[0.01, 0.28]
<b>Maintenance</b>			
<b>STEP 1: Control Variables (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.24)</b>			
Religiosity	0.40	0.08	[0.25, 0.58]
Age	0.01	0.02	[-0.03, 0.04]
Nationality <sup>a</sup>	-0.16	0.14	[-0.43, 0.10]
<b>STEP 2: Control Variables + Predictors (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.27)</b>			
Religiosity	0.37	0.08	[0.20, 0.55]
Age	0.01	0.02	[-0.03, 0.04]
Nationality <sup>a</sup>	-0.05	0.13	[-0.31, 0.20]
Settlement intentions	-0.10	0.10	[-0.27, 0.12]
Perceived maintenance expectations	0.19	0.09	[0.03, 0.38]

**Table 2:** Hierarchical multiple regression using bootstrap analyses predicting asylum seekers' acculturation preferences. Notes: <sup>a</sup> -1 = Syrian, 1 = Iraqi, N = 103, Bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples.

expectations. However, perception of majority members' expectations on the adoption dimension did not predict asylum seekers' adoption preferences independently of settlement intentions. It is worth noting that perception of majority members' adoption expectations was the only dimension of perception of majority members' acculturation expectations that significantly and positively correlated with settlement intentions. As proposed by Zagefka et al. (2011), immigrants may interpret majority members'

cultural adoption expectations as signals of acceptance in the host country. In turn, these signals might have affected our respondent's settlement intentions.

Results also showed that Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers reported a high willingness to participate in the host society and to adopt the host culture, while maintaining their culture of origin. Moreover, willingness to maintain their origin culture was significantly lower than their desire to adopt and to participate in the host society.

Several interpretations can be envisioned. First of all, as we mentioned in the introduction, the acculturation preferences endorsed by these recently arrived asylum seekers are germane to pre-acculturation preferences. Asylum seekers face vital issues (i.e. finding a job and accommodation, etc.) that imply getting involved in the host society and learning the host culture and language. This could account for the high priority placed on host culture adoption and participation in the host society, and for the lower priority placed on cultural maintenance. Alternatively, effects of a social desirability bias could account for these results (Pansu & Beauvois, 2004). Indeed, these people were still in the asylum application stage of the procedure, so that their future was directly dependent on the decision of some majority members. However, we sought to minimize this well-known bias. Hence, people who established contact with participants were of either Syrian or Iraqi origin, and they clearly explained that the survey was totally unrelated to the asylum application procedure. We also guaranteed anonymity. However, these measures might not be sufficient to completely discard this explanation. Finally, Ward and Kus (2012) argued that the integration orientation was chosen more frequently when acculturation was framed in attitudinal rather than in behavioural terms. It was the case in this study, as acculturation preferences were framed as “ideal cultural orientations”. Further research on asylum seekers’ acculturation should take this distinction in measurement methods into consideration. For instance, longitudinal designs could be used for assessing to what extent prior acculturation preferences predict later acculturation behaviours.

Two important limitations of this study should be addressed. First of all, even if assessment through single items has been previously used within the acculturation literature (Piontkowski, Florack, Hoelker & Obdržálek, 2000; Snauwaert, Soenens, Vanbeselaere, & Boen 2003; Ward & Kus, 2012), multi-items have obviously greater content validity and are more robust. This option was chosen because of the constraints of the fieldwork. Indeed, reaching Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers recently arrived in Belgium was particularly difficult. In addition, completing a long questionnaire would have been ill adapted for people whose life situation was in great turmoil. We also opted for a very short questionnaire in order to maximize participation. Secondly, we did not address the gender issue. Beyond the fact that women are a minority in the refugee flow coming from the Middle East (UNHCR, 2015), their integration is a sensitive and understudied issue. Several important differences have been found between men and women immigrants on various levels of integration, such as contact with the majority members of the host society or migrant women’s integration into the labour market (GCIM, 2005). Investigating these potential differences appears particularly important considering that some European politicians recently put this subject on the political agenda. Some have publicly questioned the integration of women. For example, David Cameron, the then British Prime Minister, suggested introducing a language test for immigrant women, and to deport those who fail it (Mason & Sherwood, 2016).

The present paper has at least three practical implications. First of all, while research has largely shown that majority members tend to favour cultural adoption (e.g., Zagefka & Brown, 2002), we showed that Iraqi and Syrian asylum seekers generally meet these expectations. This result questions the general trend of public policies in immigrants’ integration throughout European countries which force newcomers to adopt the host culture (Groenendijk, 2011). Indeed, our results from male asylum seekers suggest that these newcomers have already freely chosen to adopt the host culture and participate in the host society. Secondly, these results suggest that asylum seekers’ perceptions of the messages sent by the majority members regarding how they have to behave in the host country is a key predictor of their own integration orientations. In this regard, this study sheds light on the potentially damaging impact that the widespread hostile messages in the European public space may have on future relations between asylum seekers and national majorities (Bunyan, 2015). Finally, in light of the influence of settlement intentions on asylum seekers’ integration process that we have obtained, one might anticipate the harmful effects of legislation limiting the refugees’ residence permit, such as the preliminary bill brought forward by the Belgian Council of Ministers in December 2015 (Conseil des ministres, 2015). Indeed, anticipating a short stay in the host country might undermine refugees’ willingness to adopt the host country culture and participate in the host society.

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### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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