



Rejection, Stigma and Self-Esteem Among South American Immigrants in an Irregular Situation in Chile

José Berríos-Riquelme¹ · Dolores Frías-Navarro² · Viviana Vargas-Salinas³ · Olaya Grau-Rengifo⁴

Accepted: 21 April 2025 / Published online: 30 April 2025

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2025

Abstract

The reality of individuals without an immigration status is complicated because of administrative problems and the effects of negative social interactions on their well-being. The present article analyzes the possible mediating role of internalized stigma in the relationship between perceived rejection and self-esteem among South American individuals without an immigration status in Chile. The study involved the participation of 174 immigrants living in Chile for at least one year without an immigration status; their participation was voluntary and they did not receive any payment for being part of the study. The results indicate that internalized stigma fully mediates the effect of perceived rejection on the self-esteem of these people, which shows how negative social interactions can be for this population. We conclude with the importance of the findings for future studies, policies, and interventions with South American individuals without an immigration status.

Keywords South-south migration · Migration policy · Mediation analysis · Undocumented migrants · Immigration status

Background

Over the last ten years, Chile has been characterized as a recipient country for a high flow of South American immigrants [1]. Thousands of South American individuals without an immigration status live in the country, which is mainly due to restrictive, criminalizing, and punitive policies that Chile has implemented to control migratory flows [2, 3]. The current official estimate of individuals without immigration status in Chile reached 107,223 people, which would constitute 6.6% of the estimated foreign population in the country [1].

Individuals without immigration status are vulnerable, a condition determined by their legal status. This prevents them from obtaining decent employment and access to services for which a residence permit is required [4]. This vulnerability is accentuated because they are associated with marginality, delinquency, and poverty [5]. The perception of individuals without an immigration status as undesirable leads to rejection and exclusion during intergroup interactions in the host society. The social rejection suffered by irregular immigrants takes the form of discriminatory and denigrating acts, which usually occur violently in the different contexts where these people are inserted [6, 7]. This perceived rejection is a factor that has a significant impact on the self-esteem of the migrant population [8]. Self-esteem is the accumulation of positive and negative feelings that the person considers vital for personal evaluation [9]. This variable plays a crucial role in facing adverse events experienced by migrants in the host society, predicting a positive ethnic identity, and high life satisfaction [8, 10–12]. At the same time, self-esteem is a variable that allows interventions to mitigate the impact of discrimination on mental health [13–15].

Immigrants' perceived rejection also impacts the stigma of this population, leading them to develop a negative self-image of their presence in the host society [16]. Stigma is

✉ José Berríos-Riquelme
jberrios@uta.cl

¹ Department of Social Sciences, Universidad de Tarapacá, Iquique, Chile

² Department of Behavioral Sciences Methodology, Universidad de Valencia, Valencia, España

³ Department of Social Psychology, Universidad de Valencia, Valencia, España

⁴ School of Social Work, Pontificia Universidad Católica, Santiago, Chile

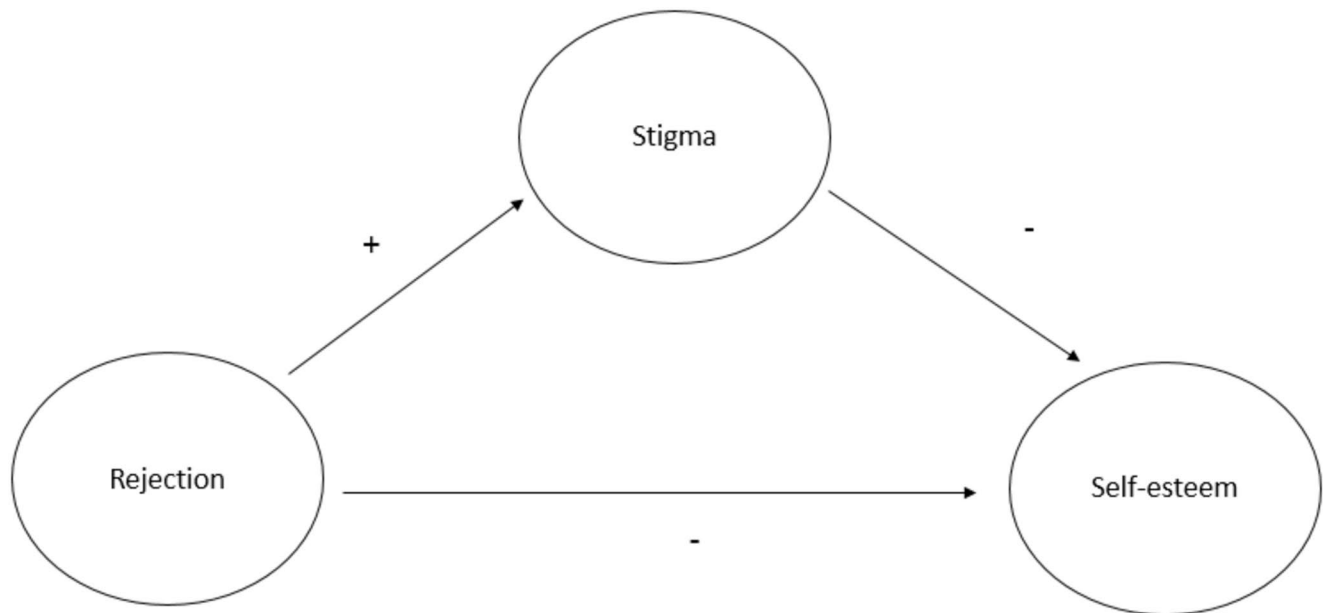


Fig. 1 The relationship between perceived rejection, and self-esteem with internalized stigma as a mediating variable. Source: Author's elaboration.

understood as an attribute that discredits and devalues a person's identity [17]. The stigma of South American immigrants in Chile is that they threaten the local population in the work and cultural spheres [18, 19]. The literature has addressed this phenomenon, explaining that the origin of this stigma is determined by immigration legislation, political discourses, and the media [2, 5, 20, 21].

Several studies have indicated that immigrants in Chile can internalize the stigma held by the national population towards them since they recognize the negative stereotypes that exist toward their group [22]. Thus, when immigrants internalize this stigma, a negative self-perception is generated that has a direct impact on their self-esteem since they recognize that the group to which they belong is devalued and, therefore, their self-image is threatening [23]. Consequently, this negative impact results in a decrease in the ability of immigrants to cope with adverse events in daily life since the stigma internalization results in low self-esteem in minority groups [24].

The Current Study

The relationship between perceived rejection and self-esteem is hypothesized to be mediated by the internalized stigma perceived by individuals without an immigration status; the model to be tested is shown in Fig. 1. Consequently, the general objective of the present study is to evaluate the mediating role of stigma in the relationship between

perceived rejection, and self-esteem in South American individuals without an immigration status in Chile.

Methods

Participants and Data Collection

We conducted a cross-sectional study using a convenience nonrandomized sample of immigrants living in the metropolitan region of Chile in 2018. This region was chosen because it has a considerable number of immigrants in the country [1]. The questionnaires with all the necessary information to carry out the analyses were selected to meet the study's objective, reaching an $n=174$, where 121 were men (69.5%) and 53 were women (30.5%). Accordingly, the main nationalities of undocumented immigrants were Peru (50.6%), Colombia (29.9%), Venezuela (12.6%), and Bolivia (12; 6.9%).

This study involved a more extensive study to assess the prejudice and discrimination perceived by South American immigrants in Chile. The institution's ethics committee to which the responsible researcher is affiliated approved the research. Individuals were recruited at a non-governmental organization that provides free job, social and legal resources to immigrants. The inclusion criteria were defined as follows: legal age of in Chile (18 years old), South American origin, without an immigration status, and living in the country for more than one year. After informed consent,

eligible participants completed the voluntary survey that took approximately 30–45 min.

Measures

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section one included sociodemographic questions to characterize the sample variables. Section two inquired about the three latent variables under study: perceived rejection, internalized stigma, and self-esteem.

Perceived rejection. The subscale of exclusion and perceived rejection of the perceived ethnic discrimination scale was used to assess this variable [25]. This subscale has four items that assess the perceived rejection of immigrants in the host society, some of their items are “You have been ignored or not paid attention to” or “You have been made to feel that you are an outsider”. There are three response options in a Likert-type format: never (1), sometimes (2), and many times (3). The minimum score to be obtained is 4 points, and the maximum is 12 points, where the higher the score, the greater the perceived rejection. According to McDonald’s Omega, its internal consistency was acceptable ($\omega=0.646$).

Internalized stigma. The internalized group threat scale was used to measure this variable [22]. The scale consists of seven items and measures internalized immigrant stigma from the threat perspective. Examples of items include: “Most Chileans think that South American immigrants take their jobs” or “Chileans think that South American immigrants speak and express themselves worse than they do”. The response scale ranges from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (6), with the minimum score being 7 points and the maximum 42 points; the higher the score, the higher the perceived stigma. The scale’s internal consistency was excellent according to McDonald’s Omega ($\omega=0.853$).

Self-esteem. The self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg self-esteem scale [9], with evidence of validity in Chile [26]. The instrument has ten items in a Likert-type format with four response options ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (4). Five items are in reverse format (3, 5, 8, 9, and 10). After reconverting the inverse items, the scale’s total score is added to obtain the degree of self-esteem, making it possible to obtain a minimum of 10 points and a maximum of 40, where the higher the score, the higher the degree of self-esteem of the person. According to McDonald’s Omega, the value of the internal consistency is good ($\omega=0.807$). Some of the items are: “I feel that I have no reason to be proud of myself” or “I would like to value myself more”.

Analysis

A database developed in Jamovi software was created from the information obtained from the questionnaires [27]. First, a descriptive analysis of the sociodemographic variables was carried out. Subsequently, the assumptions were tested to perform the mediation analysis via regressions; after testing the theoretically proposed degree of a statistically significant relationship between the main study variables, the mediation analysis was performed to assess whether internalized stigma plays a mediating role between perceived rejection and self-esteem. The effect sizes of the regression tests were evaluated through standardized betas, where the expected effect values are small ($\beta=0.02$), medium ($\beta=0.15$), and large ($\beta=0.35$) effects [28]. The total effect of the predictor variable on the predicted variable is not expected to be statistically significant when the mediator variable is included in the proposed model (see Fig. 1).

Results

The mediation analysis results show that perceived rejection inversely predicts self-esteem with a moderate effect size and in a statistically significant way ($\beta=-0.210$, $z=-2.83$, $p=.005$). The perceived rejection was also corroborated to directly impact internalized stigma statistically and with a large effect size ($\beta=0.301$, $z=4.17$, $p<.001$). Finally, internalized stigma can also be asserted to be a statistically significant predictor of self-esteem with a medium to large effect size ($\beta=-0.250$, $z=-3.32$, $p<.001$). The relationship between perceived rejection and self-esteem is no longer statistically significant (direct effect ($\beta=-0.134$, $z=-1.79$, $p=.073$)) so that it can be asserted that internalized stigma fully mediates the relationship between perceived rejection and self-esteem ($\beta=-0.075$, $z=-2.60$, $p=.009$). These results show that the indirect effect of stigma corresponds to 35.71%, which explains that the effect of perceived rejection on self-esteem is channeled through the internalized stigma perceived by South American individuals without immigration status in Chile.

Discussion

The results of the study present significant evidence on the mediating role of internalized stigma and affirm that it fully mediates the relationship between perceived rejection and self-esteem of individuals without immigration status. Working on internalized stigma with immigrants in an irregular situation could diminish the effect of perceived rejection on self-esteem, allowing immigrants to improve

their self-image to face adverse events that occur in the host society [10].

The role of internalized stigma has been essential to understand how immigrants are aware that they belong to a group that is socially devalued [22]. For example, a study with South American immigrants in Spain, showed that the internalized stigma by this group affects the emotions they perceived when interacting with the national population [29]. Another example is a study with Mexican immigrants without immigration status in the U.S., who see their possibilities of social insertion truncated because the stigma leads them to marginalize themselves in social interactions [30]. It is important to continue investigating the internalized stigma because most of the research in this area has been conducted with immigrants with immigration status.

The rejection and stigmatization of undocumented migrants are rooted in social structures that perpetuate their structural vulnerability [31]. Therefore, it is necessary to implement migration policies aimed at profound social changes that promote the social insertion of immigrants without immigration status from coexistence based on respect for human rights, as well as on the acceptance of the differences of others. The implementation of these policies should consider two essential perspectives: a) The first is to encourage immigrants to develop coping strategies to block the negative effects of internalized stigma, where an example is the experiences that suggest the development of positive emotions to improve the self-esteem of immigrants without immigration status [32]. The second is oriented towards the creation of programs that promote coexistence between immigrants and nationals, given that positive interactions would help to diminish the stigma that minority groups have in society, favoring their integration and helping them to stop being seen as a threat [16, 18, 33]. Promoting both types of actions will require political agents and civil society organizations to lead in promoting these programs.

Even with the novel results of the present research, it is necessary to review its limitations. First, it is impossible to corroborate the causality of the relationships proposed in the mediation analysis; however, the association between variables was established according to a solid theoretical approach. A second limitation is that the sample represents only a subset of immigrants in an irregular situation in Chile; however, achieving a sample of this type with an irregular population is difficult because it is impossible to obtain a record of all the people in this administrative condition. Considering these limitations, interpretations of the findings should be made with caution. Concerning the strengths of the study, it is possible to affirm that there was a high number of individuals without an immigration status, especially if we consider how difficult it is to access a sample with

these characteristics. Another strength is that this is the first study to examine the mediating role of internalized stigma among individuals without immigration status in Chile, allowing us to lay the groundwork for future initiatives that address the reality of this population.

While this study provides valuable insights, future research should consider other models in which internalized stigma mediates the impact of perceived rejection on other measures of mental health. These models could be evaluated together with the contact variable as a moderator, given its potential to influence the relationships of the migrant population [34]. It would be pertinent to evaluate whether internalized stigma also mediates the relationship between rejection and self-esteem in aliens with immigration status. At the same time, it would be advisable to add other variables to the analysis, such as perceived support and resilience, which would provide a more complete analysis of the variables that could explain differences in self-esteem levels. Another alternative would be to plan longitudinal studies to assess whether these dynamics of exclusion are maintained over time despite social and political changes, also considering whether the administrative status of immigrants is maintained or changed. Finally, it is necessary to advance in the understanding of whether this stigma is given by their administrative status or only by the fact of being immigrants, so it would be appropriate to investigate this idea with qualitative perspectives that could deepen the explanation that immigrants have in this regard. This understanding will guide the development of intervention strategies focused on the variables that harm the self-esteem of these individuals.

It is possible to conclude that internalized stigma is a key mechanism through which the perception of rejection negatively impacts the self-esteem of people without immigration status. A deeper understanding of these practical implications is essential for designing and implementing policies aimed at promoting the successful integration of this population. Such initiatives could significantly enhance their overall well-being, promote social cohesion, and mitigate the adverse effects of perceived rejection and internalized stigma.

Acknowledgements Our heartfelt gratitude goes to all the migrants who trusted our team and agreed to participate in this research.

Author Contributions All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Conceptualization: José Berrios-Riquelme, Dolores Frias-Navarro, Viviana Vargas-Salinas and Olaya Grau-Rengifo; Methodology: José Berrios-Riquelme, Dolores Frias-Navarro; Formal analysis and investigation: José Berrios-Riquelme, Dolores Frias-Navarro, Viviana Vargas-Salinas and Olaya Grau-Rengifo; Writing—original draft preparation: José Berrios-Riquelme; Writing—review and editing: José Berrios-Riquelme, Dolores Frias-Navarro, Viviana Vargas-Salinas and Olaya Grau-Rengifo; Funding acquisition: José Berrios-Riquelme and Olaya Grau-Rengifo.

Funding This work was supported by Universidad de Tarapacá [Proyecto UTA-MAYOR N°6747-24] and Núcleo Milenio MIGRA: percepciones y consecuencias de la inmigración [ANID-MILENIO-NCS2022_051].

Declarations

Ethical Approval This research was approved by the Scientific Ethics Committee of University of Tarapacá, through document N°012/2017. All research was carried out under the standards of the Declaration of Helsinki for working with individuals.

Consent All participants were asked for informed consent to be part of the study.

Data Due to ethical issues, the database can only be shared for justified reasons.

Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

References

- Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Servicio Nacional de Migraciones. Informe de resultados de la estimación de personas extranjeras residentes en Chile. 2023. https://www.inec.cl/docs/default-source/demografia-y-migracion/publicaciones-y-anuarios/migración-internacional/estimación-población-extranjera-en-chile-2018/estimación-población-extranjera-en-chile-2022-resultados.pdf?sfvrsn=869dce24_4
- Dufraix R, Ramos R, Quinteros D. Ordenar La Casa: securitización y producción de irregularidad En El Norte de Chile. *Sociológicas*. 2020;22(55):172–96. <https://doi.org/10.1590/15174522-105689>.
- Thayer L. Puertas Cerradas y Huellas abiertas: migración irregular, trayectorias precarias y políticas Restrictivas En Chile. *Migraciones Internacionales*. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.33679/rmi.v1i1.2270>. 12,22.
- Liberona N, Romero M, Salinas S, Veloso K. Tráfico de migrantes En Las Fronteras Del Norte de Chile: irregularización migratoria y sus resistencias. *Derecho PUCP*. 2022;899–36. <https://doi.org/10.18800/derechopucp.202202.001>.
- Gissi N, Aguilar H. Entre el miedo y la xenofobia: política migratoria, vulnerabilidad social y emergencia de un Estado penal en Chile (2018–2023). *Revista Pueblos y fronteras digital*. 2023;18:1–23. <https://doi.org/10.22201/cimsur.18704115e.2023.v18.680>
- Ambiado C, Veloso V, Tijoux M. ¿Trabajo sin Libertad En Chile? Migrantes Entre El racismo, La violencia y La dependencia. *Andamios*. 2022;19(48):161–81. <https://doi.org/10.29092/uacm.v19i48.899>.
- Berrios-Riquelme J, Castillo-Rozas G, Grau-Rengifo O. Perceived workplace discrimination by South American immigrants in Chile: A quantitative study in a large sample. *REMHU*. 2024;32:e321901. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-85852503880003208>.
- Urzúa A, Ferrer R, Olivares E, Rojas J, Ramírez R. El efecto de La discriminación Racial y Étnica sobre La autoestima individual y colectiva Según El Fenotipo auto-reportado En migrantes Colombianos En Chile. *Terapia Psicológica*. 2019;37(3):225–40. <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-48082019000300225>.
- Rosenberg M. Society and the adolescent self-image. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1965.
- Urzúa A, Cabrera C, Calderón, Caqueo-Urizar A. The mediating role of self-esteem on the relationship between perceived discrimination and mental health in South American immigrants in Chile. *Psychiatry Res*. 2019;271:187–94. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2018.11.028>.
- Crocker J, Major B. Social stigma and self-esteem: the self-protective properties of stigma. *Psychol Rev*. 1989;96:608–30. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.96.4.608>.
- Murillo J, Molero F. La satisfacción vital: Su relación Con El prejuicio, La identidad Nacional, La autoestima y El bienestar material, En inmigrantes. *Acta Colombiana De Psicología*. 2012;15(2):99–108. <https://actacolombianapsicologia.ucatolica.edu.co/article/view/270>.
- Berrios-Riquelme J, Maluenda-Albornoz J, Castillo-Rozas G. Perceived discrimination and mental health of South American immigrants in Chile: the protective role of the self-esteem in four nationalities. *Social Work Mental Health*. 2022;20(62):282–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332985.2021.2007438>.
- Feng D, Xu L. The relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological distress among Chinese pulmonary tuberculosis patients: the moderating role of self-esteem. *Psychol Health Med*. 2015;20(2):177–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2014.958505>.
- Kong D. Ethnic minorities' paranoia and self-preservative work behaviors in response to perceived ethnic discrimination, with collective self-esteem as a buffer. *J Occup Health Psychol*. 2016;21(3):334–51. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000013>.
- Berrios-Riquelme J, Ventura-Leon J, Maluenda-Albornoz J, Barboza-Palomino M. Propiedades Psicométricas de La Escala de Amenaza grupal internalizada Por inmigrantes Latinoamericanos En Chile. *Revista De Ciencias Sociales*. 2021;27(42):467–83. <https://doi.org/10.31876/rev.v27i2.35935>.
- Goffman I. Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall; 1963.
- Carmona-Halty M, Navas M, Rojas-Paz P. Percepción de Amenaza Exogrupal, Contacto intergrupal y prejuicio afectivo Hacia colectivos migrantes Latinoamericanos En Chile. *Interciencia*. 2018;43(1):23–7.
- Mera M, Martínez-Zelaya G, Bilbao M, Garrido A. Chilenos ante La Inmigración: Un estudio de Las relaciones Entre orientaciones de aculturación, percepción de Amenaza y bienestar social En El Gran Concepción. *Universitas Physiol*. 2017;16(5):1–14. <https://doi.org/10.11144/Javeriana.upsyl6-5.cier>.
- Cociña-Cholaky M. Contradicciones de La política migratoria Chilena (2018–2022). *Derecho PUCP*. 2022;89:229–60. <https://doi.org/10.18800/derechopucp.202202.008>.
- Gaete R. Crisis migratoria En El Norte de Chile. *Encuadres informativos de La prensa regional*. *Estudios Fronterizos*. 2022;23:e100. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2216100>.
- Berrios-Riquelme J. Labor market insertion of professional Venezuelan immigrants in Northern Chile: precariousness and discrimination in the light of migration policy. *REMHU*. 2021;29(62):121–44. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-85852503880006208>.
- Jia X, Liu X, Shi B. Perceived discrimination and subjective Well-being in Chinese migrant adolescents: collective and personal Self-esteem as mediators. *Front Psychol*. 2017;8:1213. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01213>.
- Jones J. Cultural racism: the intersection of race and culture in intergroup conflict. In: Prentice DA, Miller DT, editors. *Cultural divides: Understanding and overcoming group conflict*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; 1999. pp. 465–90.
- Brondolo E, Kelly K, Coakley V, Gordon T, Thompson S, Levy E. The perceived ethnic discrimination questionnaire: development

- and preliminary validation of a community version. *J Appl Soc Psychol.* 2005;35(2):335–65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2005.tb02124.x>.
26. Rojas-Barahona C, Zegers B. La Escala de autoestima de Rosenberg: Validación Para Chile En Una muestra de Jóvenes Adultos, Adultos y Adultos mayores. *Revista Médica De Chile.* 2009;137(6):791–800.
 27. The Jamovi Project. (Version 2.2) [Computer Software]. <https://www.jamovi.org>
 28. Cohen J. Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences. 2nd ed. Lawrence Earlbaum Associates; 1988.
 29. Berríos-Riquelme J, Frías-Navarro D, Pascual-Soler M, Badenes-Ribera L. Escala de Amenaza grupal internalizada Por inmigrantes Latinoamericanos En España: evidencias iniciales de fiabilidad y Validez. *Interciencia;* 43(5): 365–71. https://www.interciencia.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/365-BERRIOS-43_5.pdf
 30. Verduzco e Igartúa G. De Las migraciones indocumentadas desde México a Estados Unidos a Los Flujos documentados de trabajadores. *Migraciones Internacionales;* 13:16. <https://doi.org/10.33679/rmi.v1i1.2306>
 31. Liberona N, Ramos R, Piñones C, Corona M. En Tránsito Por El Norte de Chile: Desplazamiento forzado de Población venezolana Bajo El control fronterizo y sanitario Durante La pandemia Por COVID-19 (2020–2021). *J Latin Am Caribb Anthropol;* 29(2): 147–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12718>
 32. Sirriyeh A. Emotions and emotional reflexivity in undocumented migrant youth activism. *Sociol Rev;* 72(5): 1057–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261231173753>
 33. Pettigrew T, Tropp L. How does intergroup contact reduce prejudice? Meta-analytic tests of three mediators. *Eur J Soc Psychol.* 2008;38(6):922–34. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.504>.
 34. Díaz-Ramírez J, Berríos-Riquelme J, Maluenda-Albornoz J, Grau-Rengifo O, Castillo-Rozas G, Vidal-Figueroa C. Predictor variables of immigrant rooting: A model using machine learning. *Interciencia.* 2024;49(12):701–10. https://www.interciencia.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/04_7247_Com_Diaz-Ramirez_v49n12_10.pdf.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.