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► **To cite this version:**

Christelle Maisonneuve, Anne Taillandier-Schmitt. Cognitive and affective empathy effects on perception of migrants and prejudices. Unity, Diversity and Culture, XXII Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology, 2014, Reims, France. pp.145-150. hal-01723499

HAL Id: hal-01723499

<https://hal.univ-rennes2.fr/hal-01723499>

Submitted on 5 Mar 2018

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The Effects of Cognitive and Emotional Empathy on the Perception and Prejudice towards Migrants: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Improving intergroup attitudes and relationships have been largely studied. Empathy appears to play a mediational role between perspective taking and prejudices or attitudes towards out-groups (Batson et al., 1997; Finlay & Stephan, 2000; Vescio et al., 2003). The aim of this exploratory study is to examine how cognitive and emotional components of empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006) were linked to the perception of immigrant targets who behave depending on the four acculturation strategies (integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization) as defined by Berry (1997). Participants first filled in a French version of the Basic Empathic Scale. Second, they read and evaluated one of the four acculturative migrant profiles (Maisonneuve & Testé; 2007) and third they filled in the blatant and subtle prejudices questionnaire (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). The results replicated preference for integration before assimilation and marginalization. Separated profiles were less appreciated than the three others. More interestingly, an interaction effect between conservation and emotional empathy suggests that the more people declare themselves high on the emotional component of empathy, the more they appreciate the target that conserves his culture. On subtle prejudice, no interaction effect was found. But, on blatant prejudice, interaction effects were obtained between acculturative strategies and the two components of empathy. For example, concerning participants who read the scenario of separation, the higher they declared themselves on emotional component of empathy, the less they declare blatant prejudice. More surprisingly, for participants who were in the “assimilation” condition, the higher they declared themselves on cognitive component of empathy, the higher they scored on blatant prejudice. Theoretical contributions of this study are discussed as the importance to distinguish the effects of emotional and cognitive components of empathy on perception of migrants and prejudices, depending on the migrants’ acculturative strategies. Finally, implications of these results are proposed.

Introduction

Empathy plays a central role in human behaviors, and it has been studied for a long time in psychology (Stotland, 1969). Empathy consists of “both a cognitive element involving taking the perspective of another and an emotional element involving various type of emotional reactions to the other” (Duan & Hill, 1996). The cognitive empathy refers to “an intellectual or imaginative apprehension of another emotional state” (Spreng, Mc Kinnon, Mar & Levine, 2009, p.62). The emotional empathy corresponds to an emotional reaction to others’ emotional state which is not dependent on a cognitive understanding of why a person is suffering. To assess this dual component concep-

tion model of *empathy*, Jolliffe & Farrington (2006) have validated a Basic Empathetic Scale. For our research, we will use a French validation (Carré, Stefaniak, D’Ambrosio, Bensalah & Besche-Richard, 2013) of this scale.

Among the effects of empathy that have already been demonstrated, it may favor helping or pro-social behaviors (Batson, 1991). For example, inducing empathy may improve attitudes toward a homeless or a VIH victim target, depending on the responsibility of the target, and it may be generalized to the target’s group (Batson, Polycarpou, Harmon-Jones, Imhoff, Mitchener, Bednar, Klein & Highberger, 1997; Batson, Chang, Orr & Rowland, 2002). Concerning the way empathy can improve intergroup relations (Finlay & Stephan, 2000; Stephan & Finlay, 1999; Vescio, Sechrist & Paolucci, 2003), results are rather complex. First, empathy may have conflicting effects (Finlay & Stephan, 2000). Second, identification of processes by which empathy may improve intergroup relations seems complex too (Vescio *et al.*, 2003). Some authors show that emotional empathy may play a mediational role between perspective taking and prejudices or attitudes towards out-groups (Batson *et al.*, 1997). However, Vescio *et al.* (2003) show that participants in a perspective-taking condition, compared with participants in an objective one, perceived more situational causes when they have to judge an African American target. Moreover, they demonstrated that these situational attributions explain more than emotional empathy, the link between perspective taking and prejudices towards outgroup.

In our research, the aim was to examine the link between empathy and blatant and subtle prejudices. Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) distinguish blatant prejudice conceptualized as a traditional and direct form of prejudice and subtle prejudice conceptualized as a modern, distant and more indirect form of prejudice. We expect that empathy may not have the same effects on both blatant and subtle prejudices depending on the acculturative strategies immigrants’ targets may endorse. The Four Boxes model of Berry (1980) defined strategies immigrants may endorse depending on two dimensions (conservation of their original culture and adoption of the host one). Based on this model, a lot of research shows that host populations prefer immigrants who adopt rather than those who do not adopt. Furthermore, results obtained on French samples, showed that in the French republican context, immigrants who endorse integration are preferred over those who endorse assimilation, marginalization and last separatism (Barette, Bourhis, Personnaz & Personnaz, 2004; Maisonneuve & Testé, 2007). Even if some authors argue that the French model of integration is assimilationist (Barette and al., 2004), at an individual level, assimilation can sometimes appear as the favorite strategy but integration is often preferentially chosen. We first expected to replicate results usually obtained in the literature (Barette *et al.*, 2004) on the evaluation of an immigrant target, that is the preference for immigrants who endorse integration over those who endorse assimilation, marginalization and last separation (H1). Moreover, the more empathetic partic-

ipants are (on emotional and cognitive dimensions), the more they would appreciate the target whatever his strategy (H2).

Research results show that when an immigrant target group is presented as threatening, participants declare more blatant than subtle prejudices (Cohrs & Asbrock, 2009). We expected thus, that when participants are faced with an immigrant who integrates (conserving his original culture and at the same time adopting the host one), they would declare low blatant and subtle prejudices. Next, when they are faced with an immigrant who separates (conserving his original culture and not adopting the host one), they would declare blatant prejudices, probably because they may feel threatened by him and because they may expect another behavior from him. When they are faced with an immigrant who assimilates (adopting the host culture without conserving his own one), participants would declare subtle prejudices, because declaring blatant prejudices against a target who gives up his own culture to adopt the host culture is not socially desirable. Finally participants faced with a target who endorses marginalization (neither conserving his original culture nor adopting the host one) would also declare subtle prejudices only (H3). Holding blatant prejudices against a fragile and isolated person could be perceived as not socially desirable..

Moreover, we can expect that, depending on participants score on the empathy scale, and depending on the strategy of the immigrant they are faced with, they may declare blatant or subtle prejudices differently. We expect that high empathetic participants (on both emotional and cognitive dimensions) would declare less blatant and subtle prejudices than low empathetic participants (H4). More precisely, when people are faced with an immigrant who integrates, no effect of empathy is expected on declaration of prejudices. On the contrary, in the separation condition (in which participants may declare blatant prejudices), we expect that the more participants declare themselves empathetic (on emotional and cognitive dimensions), the less they would reveal blatant prejudices (H5).

Method

Sample

Seventy three students from University of Caen (France) participated in the study. There were 52 women and 21 men; their mean age was 20.73 ($SD = 4.69$).

Procedure

Participants were recruited in different libraries on the campus of the University of Caen (France). First, they were asked to fill in the French version of the Basic Empathetic Scale (Carré, *et al.*, 2013). Next, they had to read one of the four acculturative (integration, assimilation, separation, marginalization) migrants' profiles (Maisonneuve & Testé, 2007; Van Oudenhoven, Prins & Buunk, 1998), and answer some questions, detailed below, about their perception of the target (named *Ahmed*). Finally, they had to fill in the blatant and subtle prejudice questionnaire (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995).

Measures

Empathy. French validation of the Basic Empathy Scale (Carré *et al.*, 2013) was used, 20 items measuring both cognitive (*e.g.* "Usually, I know when people are happy") and affective (*e.g.* "Emotions of my friend don't affect me", reverse item) components of empathy on a scale from *totally disagree*(1) to *totally agree* (7). *Cronbach alpha* = .82 for emotional empathy and *Cronbach alpha* = .72 for cognitive empathy. Moreover, cognitive empathy is positively correlated with emotional empathy, $r = .43$, $p < .001$.

Ahmed: The immigrant target perception. Four scenarios of an Ahmed were created (see the appendix for a sample). After reading one of the scenarios describing the target (as integrated, assimilated, separated or marginalized) participants were requested to answer two questions to evaluate the target ("Do you find Ahmed nice?", "Could you get along with Ahmed?"), $r = .69$, $p < .001$, we calculate an "affective score".

Prejudice. The French translated version of the scale of Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) was used (Guerin & Pelletier, 2003). Five blatant prejudice items (*e.g.* *Most of the people belonging to ethnic minorities, and receiving social security benefits could do without it*) are distinguished from nine subtle prejudices items (*e.g.* "Ethnic minority people teach different values and different know-how from those which are necessary to succeed in the French society"). *Cronbach alphas* were respectively for subtle prejudices and blatant prejudices .72 and .73. Moreover, blatant and subtle prejudices are positively correlated, $r = .62$, $p < .001$.

Results

To test our hypothesis, multiple regressions were carried out. They were conducted with Adoption of the host culture (Yes vs No, coded -1,1), *Conservation of the original culture* (Yes vs. No, coded -1,1), and cognitive and affective empathy (continuous variables as predictors).

Evaluation of Ahmed on the "affective score"

As expected (H1), we replicated the preference for integration ($M = 5.89$) over assimilation ($M = 4.70$), marginalization ($M = 4.65$) and last separatism ($M = 4.02$), $F(1,57) = 8.28$; $p = .005$. Furthermore, participants who were more empathetic on the cognitive dimension were more appreciative of Ahmed, whatever his strategy, $F(1,57) = 10.87$; $p = .001$. Our H2 is partially validated. Indeed, the expected effect was obtained only for the cognitive dimension, but not for the emotional one. But an interaction effect between the culture of origin conservation and emotional empathy was obtained, $F(1,57) = 6.65$; $p = .012$, showing that 1) when participants read the story of Ahmed who did not keep to his original culture, the more they defined themselves high on the emotional empathy scale, the less they appreciated Ahmed, 2) when participants read the story of Ahmed who kept to his original culture, the more they defined themselves high on the emotional empathy scale, the more they appreciated the target.

We expected an interaction effect between culture adoption vs. conservation and subtle prejudice, showing that subtle prejudice was more expressed in the condition of “assimilation” than in the other three conditions (H3). We didn’t obtained this result, however, in the same line, we obtained a main effect of “adoption of the host culture”, $F(1,54) = 4.41; p = .040$, showing that when participants read the adoption scenarios (integration and assimilation conditions), they declared more subtle prejudice than in non-adoption scenarios (separation and marginalization). The second main effect has to do with emotional empathy, $F(1,54) = 4.31; p = .042$. It shows that with higher measures on emotional empathy, participants scored less on subtle prejudice, which partially validate our fourth hypothesis.

No interaction effect between “conservation of original culture” and “adoption of host culture”, was found for blatant prejudice; equally, the expected main effect of empathy on blatant prejudice is not obtained. Thus hypotheses 3 and 4 were disconfirmed, respectively. Yet, three way interaction effects between both dimensions of acculturative strategies (adoption and conservation) and the two components of empathy (cognitive and emotional) on blatant prejudice are observed, partially validating H5. First of these interactions impacted the affective empathy → blatant prejudice, $F(1, 57) = 4.84; p = .031$, and is demonstrated on Figure 1. It shows that for participants who read the scenario of separation, the higher they scored on emotional component of empathy, the less blatant prejudice they declared. The same, though lesser, was observed for participants who read the scenario of assimilation. And for participants who read integration or marginalization’s descriptions, there is no effect of emotional empathy score on the declaration of blatant prejudice.

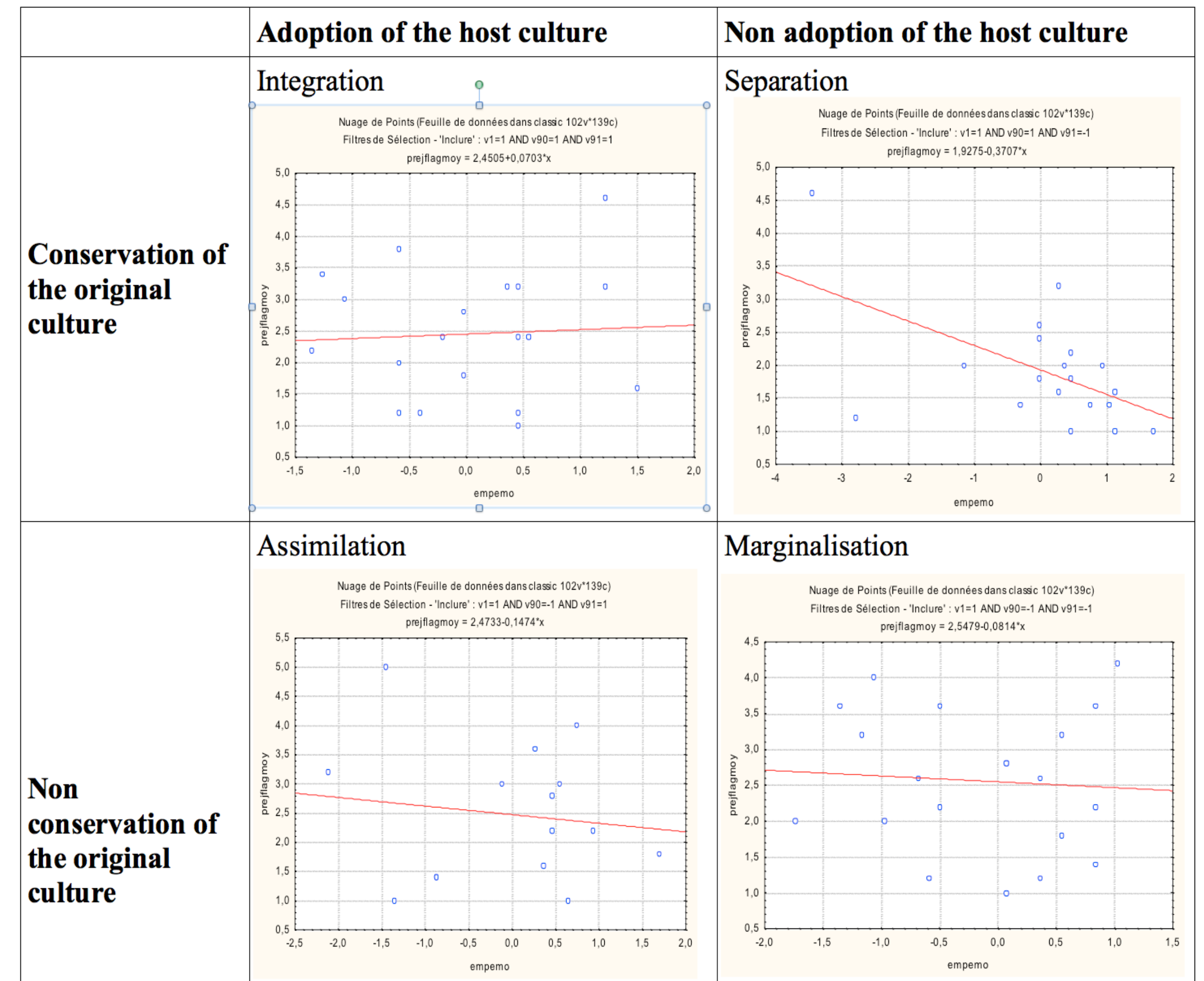


Figure 1

Effect of emotional empathy on blatant prejudices depending on Ahmed strategies

The second of these triple interactions involves cognitive aspects of empathy and its impact on blatant prejudice, $F(1, 57) = 5.68; p = .020$, showing that for participants who read the integration scenario, the higher they scored on cognitive component of empathy, the less they declared blatant prejudice. The same, but lesser, effect was obtained for participants in the separation condition. In contrast, for participants who were in the assimilation condition, the higher they scored on cognitive component of empathy, the blatant prejudice they revealed. This result was not expected and would be discussed. Finally, in the “marginalization” condition, no effect of cognitive empathy was observed. Figure 2 illustrates these findings.

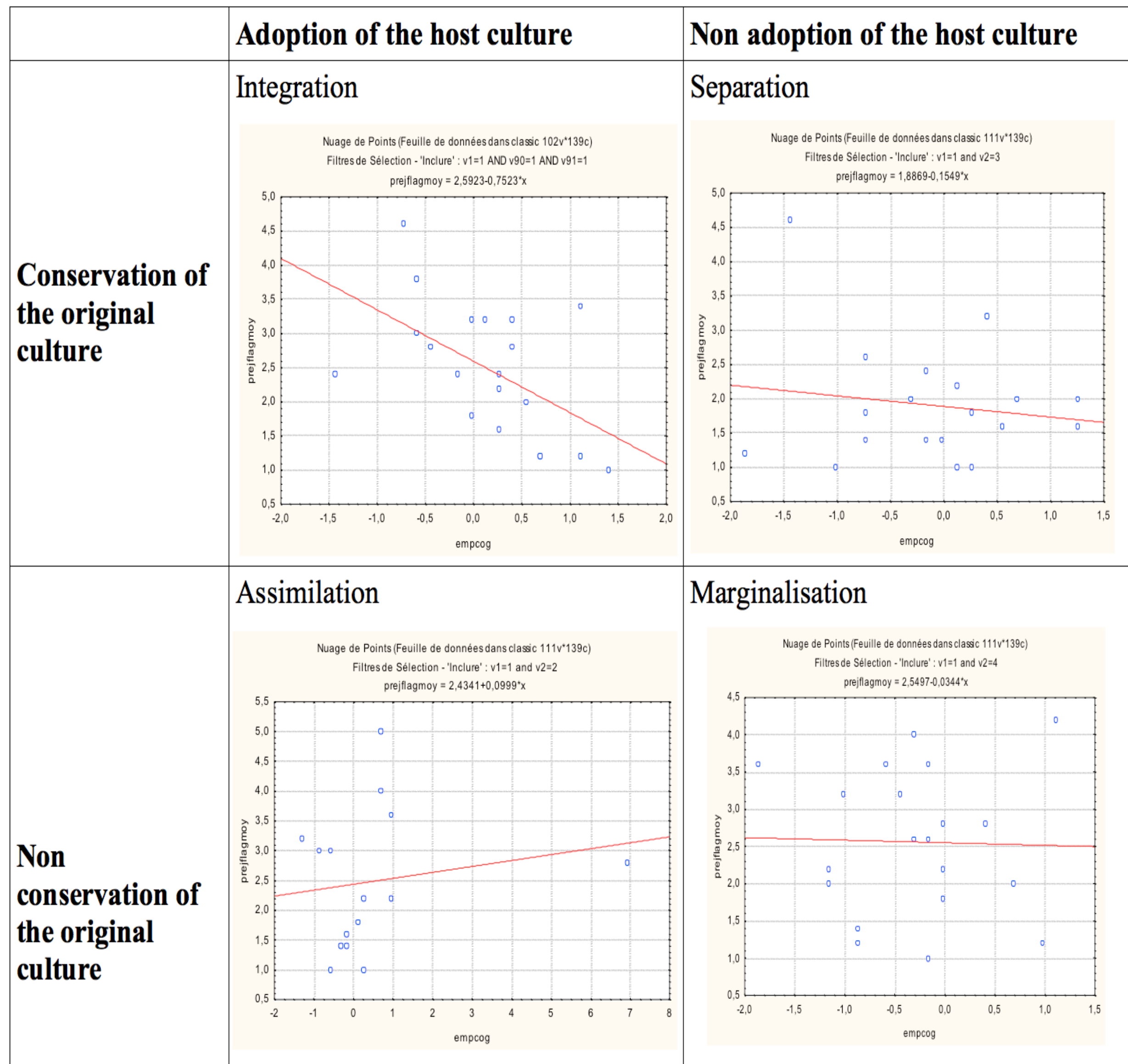


Figure 2
Effect of cognitive empathy on blatant prejudices depending on Ahmed strategies

Discussion

The aim of this study was first to replicate the preference for integration over assimilation, marginalization and separation, earlier obtained on French samples (Barrette *et al.*, 2004, Maisonneuve & Testé, 2007). As expected, this result was confirmed. The second aim was to examine the link between empathy (assessed with cognitive and emotional components) and immigrant acculturation strategies on target perception (affective score) and on prejudice (assessed with blatant and subtle distinction) against him.

The first result -showing that the more participants defined themselves high on cognitive empathy, the more they would appreciate the target whatever his strategy-, may enrich results classically obtained in intercultural psychology. The ability to imagine what “being immigrant” can imply, in a cognitive way, enhances the judgment about the

target person on affective dimension. The second result shows that with higher scores on emotional empathy, grows appreciation of a target person who maintains his original culture. This can be linked to a result from a previous study, which stressed that an assimilated target (who does not conserve) is judged more hypocritical than the other targets (Maisonneuve, Testé, Taillandier-Schmitt & Dambrun, 2014). We speculate that participants who are emotionally empathetic, do not feel comfortable with an Ahmed who takes an assimilationist frame of mind, thus rejecting his culture of origin. This fits with Stephan and Finlay, (1999) who stressed the complex effects of empathy which does not improve intercultural relations automatically and the necessity to take into account different mediators and situations in which it occurs. The present research suggests the important role of acculturation strategies in the comprehension of how empathy can influence perception of immigrants.

Concerning the expression of prejudice, participants who faced immigrants adopting the host culture declared more subtle prejudices than participants who faced immigrants who did not adopt the host culture. This result is congruent with the idea that expressing blatant prejudices about immigrants who adopt is not “socially desirable”, while subtle and indirect prejudice is perhaps more socially accepted. However, another result obtained on blatant prejudices shows that the more participants defined themselves high on cognitive empathy scale the more they declare blatant prejudices about the assimilated target. It is important to notice that in the condition of assimilation only, a high level of cognitive empathy is linked with more blatant prejudices. This result is in line with Maisonneuve *et al.* (2014). Indeed, if we consider that faced with an assimilated target, participants could find Ahmed really surprising by not conserving his culture, which would make him appear as more hypocritical than in other scenarios. Moreover, it seems logical that the more participants were cognitively empathetic, the more they couldn't understand this strategy. This proposition of explanation is rather speculative, and it should be tested with an experimental design in future studies.

In all other acculturation conditions, the link between emotional and cognitive empathy with blatant prejudice is null or negative; that is, the higher participants scored on cognitive empathy, the less blatant prejudice they revealed in the integration condition. This result is quite coherent with the fact that integration is the preferred strategy of host population and it allows to understand why. Indeed, for high cognitive empathetic participants, understanding the integration strategy, which is a rather complex one (manage to reconcile two opposite things), diminishes the expression of blatant prejudices. It is as if they considered, after examining it from the place of the target, that this strategy is the best one to resolve the difficult equation of immigration.

Finally, the higher participants scored on cognitive and emotional empathy, the less they expressed blatant prejudice in the separation condition. This latest result seems coherent with the result obtained on the affective dimension; individuals who score higher

on emotional empathy, prefer targets who conserve their culture, and are not prejudicial against them. It suggests that the separatist target is the one, which can produce more emotional empathetic reaction (like compassion) compared to other targets. Thus, empathy facilitates taking a separatist perspective which is more distant and difficult to understand for the majority group. Interestingly, results obtained in this study on prejudices may open interesting applied perspectives to improve intergroup relations.

To conclude, our main contribution concerns the way emotional and cognitive components of empathy are linked with expression of blatant and subtle prejudices, depending on strategies adopted by migrants. However, there are some limits to this study. First, the sample is really small and it consisted of French students. It would be interesting to have, in future research a larger and more representative sample, stemming from various cultures. Furthermore, empathy and its expression are doubtless connected with the normative and cultural contexts in which they find expression. It would be interesting to replicate this study in different cultural contexts. Another limitation lies in the distinction between the blatant and subtle prejudices. Indeed, even if the theoretical distinction between both concepts is quite clear, items of “subtle prejudices” can be considered by certain participants as blatant prejudices, and conversely for other participants. Third, a measure of proximity and of familiarity between participants and immigrants is needed in future studies. So, we can formulate a hypothesis that this latter variable would influence expression of empathy and prejudices. Fourthly, participants just fill in the questionnaire of cognitive and emotional empathy, then, in this research, we only explore correlations. For future research, it would be interesting to experimentally activate emotional and/or cognitive empathy state of the participants (Vescio *et al.*, 2003). Fifth, we did not distinguish between reactive and parallel facets of empathy (Finlay & Stephan, 2000). Finally, we may try to explore effects of manipulated empathy on perception of immigrants, prejudice and discrimination with targets endorsing different acculturative strategies in different public and private contexts (Maisonneuve *et al.*, 2014).

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Appendix

Ahmed comes from the Maghreb, he has lived in France for approximately ten years. When he arrived, he wondered how things were going to take place, his country and France being different. That how he describes his life in France

“My wife and I decided to be members of the community from the Maghreb. We are very faithful to all our customs because our culture of origin is always very important for us. But even if we continue both to participate in activities connected to this culture (meal of parties), we are very open at the same time to the French culture, to which we grant so a lot of value and as we try to know as much as possible. We thus live by integrating elements of our culture of origin and the French culture.

For my family, I would wish that my children and grandchildren can speak their maternal language as well as the French language, that they learn to know and to respect as much the traditions and the values of our culture of origin as those of the French culture. We go at least once a year to the country not to lose the links with the family and our culture. Even if I would prefer that my daughter marries a boy from the Maghreb, I would not oppose that she marries a French if it is her choice.

Within the framework of the work, I appreciate as much to work with colleagues from the Maghreb as French. I think that the professional relations with people of my culture of origin and the French culture can be also harmonious and enriching the one as the other one. I thus manage so much to cooperate and to communicate with these various types of colleagues “.

Ahmed intends to have the double nationality, and began steps in this direction.